Outtakes: Collected Film Essays and Reviews from Six Decades

By Stanley Kauffmann

Edited by R. J. Cardullo

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements
Biography
Introduction

FILM REVIEWS (at the time of the films' initial U.S. release)

Directors on Display (25 directors)

Strawberry and Chocolate, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1993
Guantanamera, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1995

Take the Money and Run, Woody Allen, 1969
Radio Days, Woody Allen, 1987
Another Woman, Woody Allen, 1988
Manhattan Murder Mystery, Woody Allen, 1993
Deconstructing Harry, Woody Allen, 1997

Dark Habits, Pedro Almodóvar, 1983
What Have I Done to Deserve This?, Pedro Almodóvar, 1984
Matador, Pedro Almodóvar, 1986
Kika, Pedro Almodóvar, 1993

One Wild Moment, Claude Berri, 1977
Tchao Pantin, Claude Berri, 1983
Uranus, Claude Berri, 1990

Luna, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1979
The Last Emperor, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987
Stealing Beauty, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1996

Sweetie, Jane Campion, 1989
An Angel at My Table, Jane Campion, 1990
Portrait of a Lady, Jane Campion, 1996

Shadows, John Cassavetes, 1959
Opening Night, John Cassavetes, 1977

Gardens of Stone, Francis Ford Coppola, 1987
New York Stories, Francis Ford Coppola & others, 1989
The Godfather III, Francis Ford Coppola, 1990

Hi, Mom!, Brian De Palma, 1970
Dressed to Kill, Brian De Palma, 1980
Scarface, Brian De Palma, 1983
The Untouchables, Brian De Palma, 1987
Casualties of War, Brian De Palma, 1989

The Seven Deadly Sins, Jean-Luc Godard & others, 1962
Alphaville, Jean-Luc Godard, 1965
Vladimir and Rosa, Jean-Luc Godard, 1971
Numéro deux, Jean-Luc Godard, 1975

Stroszek, Werner Herzog, 1977
Where the Green Ants Dream, Werner Herzog, 1984

Wise Blood, John Huston, 1979
Prizzi's Honor, John Huston, 1985

The Match Factory Girl, Aki Kaurismäki, 1989
Leningrad Cowboys Go America, Aki Kaurismäki, 1989
I Hired a Contract Killer, Aki Kaurismäki, 1990

Naked, Mike Leigh, 1993
Career Girls, Mike Leigh, 1997

Poor Cow, Ken Loach, 1967
Raining Stones, Ken Loach, 1993
Ladybird, Ladybird, Ken Loach, 1994
Land and Freedom, Ken Loach, 1995

Zazie (*in the Metro*), Louis Malle, 1960
Murmur of the Heart, Louis Malle, 1971
Au Revoir les Enfants, Louis Malle, 1987

Oblomov, Nikita Mikhalkov, 1979
Dark Eyes, Nikita Mikhalkov, 1987

Ecce Bombo, Nanni Moretti, 1978
Golden Dreams, Nanni Moretti, 1981
Palombella Rossa, Nanni Moretti, 1989
Dear Diary, Nanni Moretti, 1993

Tilaï, Idrissa Ouédraogo, 1990
Samba Traoré, Idrissa Ouédraogo, 1992

Days and Nights in the Forest, Satyajit Ray, 1970
The Chess Players, Satyajit Ray, 1977
The Home and the World, Satyajit Ray, 1984
Branches of the Tree, Satyajit Ray, 1990
The Broken Journey, Satyajit Ray, 1994

Mon Oncle d'Amérique, Alain Resnais, 1980
Mélo, Alain Resnais, 1986

The Aviator's Wife, Éric Rohmer, 1981
Le Beau Mariage, Éric Rohmer, 1982

Summer (*Le Rayon vert*), Éric Rohmer, 1986
Boyfriends and Girlfriends, Éric Rohmer, 1987
Four Adventures of Reinette and Mirabelle, Éric Rohmer, 1987
A Tale of Springtime, Éric Rohmer, 1990
A Tale of Winter, Éric Rohmer, 1992

The Mattei Affair, Francesco Rosi, 1972
Christ Stopped at Eboli, Francesco Rosi, 1979
The Truce, Francesco Rosi, 1997

Summer Skin, Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, 1961
Hand in the Trap, Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, 1961

Love at Twenty, François Truffaut & others, 1962
The Green Room, François Truffaut, 1978
Confidentially Yours, François Truffaut, 1983

Films in Focus (35 entries)

Mr. Arkadin, Orson Welles, 1955
Gervaise, René Clément, 1956
The Brothers Karamazov, Richard Brooks, 1958
Black Orpheus, Marcel Camus, 1959
The L-Shaped Room, Bryan Forbes, 1962
Lilith, Robert Rossen, 1964
Lord Jim, Richard Brooks, 1965
Justine, George Cukor, 1969
Ludwig, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972
We All Loved Each Other So Much, Ettore Scola, 1974
Max Havelaar, Fons Rademakers, 1976
Le Crabe tambour, Pierre Schoendoerffer, 1977
In a Year of Thirteen Moons, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1978
Theme, Gleb Panfilov, 1979
Messidor, Alain Tanner, 1979
City of Women, Federico Fellini, 1980
The Makioka Sisters, Kon Ichikawa, 1983
The Shooting Party, Alan Bridges, 1985
Year of the Dragon, Michael Cimino, 1985
Wings of Desire, Wim Wenders, 1987
The Cry of the Owl, Claude Chabrol, 1987
The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Philip Kaufman, 1988
36 Fillette, Catherine Breillat, 1988
Hanussen, István Szabó, 1988
Dead Poets Society, Peter Weir, 1989
Martha and I, Jiří Weiss, 1990
Korczak, Andrzej Wajda, 1990
Jungle Fever, Spike Lee, 1991
Orlando, Sally Potter, 1992
The Age of Innocence, Martin Scorsese, 1993

The Remains of the Day, James Ivory, 1993
The Natural, Barry Levinson, 1994
Boogie Nights, Paul Thomas Anderson, 1997
Mrs. Dalloway, Marleen Gorris, 1997
Life Is Beautiful, Roberto Benigni, 1997

Theater into Cinema (20 entries)

The Balcony, Joseph Strick, 1963
The Sea Gull, Sidney Lumet, 1968
A Doll's House, Patrick Garland, 1973
Equus, Sidney Lumet, 1977
The Elephant Man, David Lynch, 1980
The Dresser, Peter Yates, 1983
Henry IV, Marco Bellocchio, 1984
Plenty, Fred Schepisi, 1985
Die Nacht (*The Night*), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1985
'night, Mother, Tom Moore, 1986
Swimming to Cambodia, Jonathan Demme, 1987
Driving Miss Daisy, Bruce Beresford, 1989
The Madness of King George, Nicholas Hytner, 1994
Richard III, Richard Loncraine, 1995
Othello, Oliver Parker, 1995
American Buffalo, Michael Corrente, 1996
Twelfth Night, Trevor Nunn, 1996
Romeo + Juliet, Baz Luhrmann, 1996
The Crucible, Nicholas Hytner, 1996
Dancing at Lugnasa, Pat O'Connor, 1998

First Fictions (15 entries)

Charlie Bubbles, Albert Finney, 1967
Coming Apart, Milton Moses Ginsburg, 1969
Summer Paradise, Gunnel Lindblom, 1977
Gal Young 'Un, Victor Nuñez, 1979
Smithereens, Susan Seidelman, 1982
Withnail and I, Bruce Robinson, 1987
Wish You Were Here, David Leland, 1987
Lonely Woman Seeks Life Companion, Viacheslav Krishtofovich, 1987
A World Apart, Chris Menges, 1988
The Music of Chance, Philip Haas, 1993
*Mina Tannenb*aum, Martine Dugowson, 1994
Maborosi, Hirokazu Kore-eda, 1995
Manny & Lo, Lisa Krueger, 1996
Walking and Talking, Nicole Holofcener, 1996
The Daytrippers, Greg Mottola, 1996

INTERLUDE

"Film Diary, 1961-1963"

BOOK REVIEWS (5 entries)

The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era, by Thomas Schatz, 1988
Behind the Mask of Innocence: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era, by Kevin Brownlow, 1990
In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing, Walter Murch, 1995
Fritz Lang, by Patrick McGilligan, 1997
Mainly about Lindsay Anderson, by Gavin Lambert, 2000

RE-VIEWINGS & REMEMBRANCES (15 entries)

Gone With the Wind, Victor Fleming, 1939
Late Autumn, Yasujiro Ozu, 1960
"On Film Acting"
The Lost One (*Der Verlorene*), Peter Lorre, 1951
A Passage to India, David Lean, 1984
"Japanese Film"
Elena and Her Men, Jean Renoir, 1956
Sunnyside, Charles Chaplin, 1919
Love, Károly Makk, 1971
Spartacus, Stanley Kubrick, 1960
Gun Crazy, Joseph H. Lewis, 1950
"Stan Laurel, 1890-1965"
"The Lumière Brothers: Louis, 1864-1948; and Auguste, 1862-1954"
"Charles Denner, 1926-1995"
Le Samouraï, Jean-Pierre Melville, 1967

Chronology
Bibliography
Index

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My deep gratitude goes out to the late Mr. Kauffmann and his wife, Laura, for their valuable support of and assistance on this project during the final years of their lives.

Biography

Stanley Jules Kauffmann was born in New York City on April 24, 1916, and was graduated from the College of Fine Arts of New York University in 1935. He spent ten years, from 1931 to 1941, as an actor and stage manager with the Washington Square Players and published a large number of short as well as long plays. He was also the author of nine novels, published in the United States and abroad, and two collections of memoirs; for Bantam, Ballantine, and Knopf, he worked as a book publisher's editor from 1949 to 1960. From 1967 to 1986, Kauffmann taught drama and film at Yale University; between the years 1973 and 2006, he also taught at the City University of New York, Hunter College, and Adelphi University.

Starting in 1958, Kauffmann became active in criticism. At that time he was appointed the film critic of *The New Republic*, with which magazine he was associated ever since, except for an eight-month period in 1966 when he was exclusively the theater critic of *The New York Times*. In addition to his film reviews, he wrote a large number of book reviews for *The New Republic*; from 1969 to 1979 he served as both film and theater critic for this magazine; and earlier, from 1963 to 1965, Kauffmann also served as the drama critic for the Public Broadcasting television station in New York, WNET. He continued as film critic for *The New Republic* but wrote theater criticism for the *Saturday Review* for five years, from 1979 to 1985. He contributed reviews and articles to many other journals, as well—among them *Horizon*, *Commentary*, *Salmagundi*, *Yale Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Theater*, and *The American Scholar.*

Kauffmann published eight collections of film criticism in his lifetime: *A World on Film* (1966), *Figures of Light* (1971), *Living Images* (1975), *Before My Eyes* (1980), *Field of View* (1986), *Distinguishing Features* (1994), *Regarding Film* (2001), and *Ten Great Films* (2012). He was the editor of the anthology *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to "Citizen Kane"* (1972). He also published three collections of theater criticism, *Persons of the Drama* (1976), *Theater Criticisms* (1983), and *About the Theater* (2010), together with two collections of interviews: *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann* (2003) and *Film Critic Talks: Interviews with Stanley Kauffmann, 1972-2012* (2013).

In 1974 Kauffmann was given the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism; from 1972 to 1976 he was a member of the Theater-and-Film Advisory Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts; in 1969 and 1975 he was a juror for the National Book Awards; and in 1982 he received the George Polk Award for Film Criticism as well as the Edwin Booth Award in 1986, in addition to the 1986 Birmingham Film Festival Prize for Lifetime Achievement and the 1999 Telluride Film Festival Award for Criticism. A former Ford Foundation (1964, 1971), Rockefeller (1978), Guggenheim (1979-80), Japan Foundation (1986), and New York Institute for the Humanities (1995) fellow, Kauffmann received an Emmy Award for the first-ever television series about film, which he conducted for five years in the 1960s on WNET-TV, the New York PBS station. He also received, in 1995, the Outstanding Teacher Award from the Association for Theater in Higher Education.

Pre-deceased in 2012 by his wife since 1943, Laura Cohen Kauffmann, Stanley Kauffmann died in New York City on October 9, 2013, at the age of ninety-seven.

Introduction: "Man of the Movies: The Film Criticism of Stanley Kauffmann"

Wolcott Gibbs, late of *The New Yorker*, once wrote the following of his experience as a film critic: "It is my indignant opinion that ninety percent of the moving pictures exhibited in America are so vulgar, witless, and dull that it is preposterous to write about them in any publication not intended to be read while chewing gum."[1] Gibbs vowed that he would never review another movie, and he kept his promise.

As it happens, he quit movie reviewing just before the discovery that there was a market for European films in the United States. It was the 1946 box-office triumph in New York of Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* that opened the way for many low-budget Italian and French pictures. Even better ones began coming to America, from Asia as well as Europe, after the 1950 success of Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. These foreign films increasingly exposed the tinsel and cardboard of the indigenous product, but—more to the present point—they made the reviewing of movies a rewarding activity.

Stanley Kauffmann's career as a film critic for *The New Republic* began not long afterward, in February of 1958—decades before the advent of simplified thumbs-up, thumbs-down reviewing popularized by television commentators like Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. Significantly, this was also the year in which *Agee on Film* was published, and thus a year that marks the beginning of a change in general attitudes toward serious film criticism in the United States. Indeed, the 1960s and early 1970s were heady times for such criticism. Films, then, were being talked about in terms of art, and the central document of the time describing the general conversation was written in 1966 by Stanley Kauffmann and published in his very first collection of film criticism, *A World on Film* (also from 1966): it was titled "The Film Generation." "There exists a Film Generation," Kauffmann opined, "the first generation that has matured in a culture in which the film has been of accepted serious relevance, however that seriousness is defined."[2] Kauffmann's directly stated and cleanly structured essay was written in his characteristically precise, quietly professional style. Looking optimistically toward the future, "The Film Generation" supplied historical context and reasonable definition for the burgeoning American film culture.

In colleges and universities, in cafés, bars, theater lobbies, and their surrounding sidewalks, movies were then becoming the subject of heated debates. Neither moviegoing nor movie reviewing was new, as Kauffmann's own *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to "Citizen Kane"* (1972) proved. But youthful hordes, uncomfortable with literature and not yet enslaved by television, now found something to get excited about in the cinema. More than ever before and perhaps ever since, they looked to critics to stimulate, shape, or confirm their opinions, and they gravitated toward the critics who best satisfied their individual bents.

The word "critics" refers to journalistic ones (as opposed to newspaper reviewers), not academics or scholars. It was the former group that led the fight to give film stature as art, and by the first few years of the 1970s this battle had been won. Virtually every college and university in America by then was offering film courses, and many had degree programs or were in the process of developing them. Yet with every new course, program, and treatise, ironically, the less relevant the writing of the pioneering journalistic critics became to the professors.

Was this a case of film education outdistancing the journalists, whose establishment had advanced middle age or beyond, and who had therefore ceased to grow intellectually? Or had the demand to achieve academic respectability killed off the love of movies in those film scholars, who, once drawn to motion pictures out of passion, were now burying them in mounds of hopelessly "scientific," theoretical verbiage?

The split between the academics or scholars and the journalistic critics can best be understood in terms of classical and romantic temperaments: one deductive, starting with general principles and moving to specific examples, the other inductive, relying on each "text" to stimulate insights appropriate to it. And because of the strong French influence on academic thinking about film, it was unlikely then, in the mid-1970s, just as it is now, that American journalistic critics would adopt any of the academy's viewpoints. For those viewpoints go against a longstanding American tradition. Leslie Fiedler put this issue best when he said something to the effect that no matter what they try to do, the French keep reinventing neoclassicism while the Americans keep reinventing romanticism.

Stanley Kauffmann himself once said something similar in a 1992 interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*: "The academic critics think of me as an impressionist, because I . . . deal experientially with film, deal with it analytically in terms of a highly personal set of ineffable standards. That is, I could not possibly codify for you what my beliefs are about film; it's a matter of instances rather than precepts."[3] For Kauffmann, the most fundamental quality of film criticism was not the code or theory behind it, but its moral rigor—its commitment to the art of film, passion to see it improve and be taken as seriously as any fine art, and disregard for any kind of popularity. It seems, then, that for the foreseeable future (and that future may be brief given the surfeit of Internet "chat" about the cinema) journalistic criticism of this kind will be at odds with academic film study. But the journalists still need to be read, especially in universities, if only to keep alive the romantic enthusiasm that brought professors to the cinema in the first place.

Where does Stanley Kauffmann stand among the journalistic critics? Though precise terminology is elusive, there were, at the time he became prominent, two kinds of critics: the "eggheads," who preferred what were loosely called art films, and the populists, who "grooved" on Hollywood movies and their foreign counterparts where they could find them. The eggheads were Stanley Kauffmann, Dwight Macdonald, Vernon Young, and John Simon, with relatively few adherents. The populists were Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, and Manny Farber, with their legions of followers. In between, and antecedent to both groups, were good souls like James Agee, Robert Warshow, and Otis Ferguson (all three of whom died prematurely, perhaps to the enhancement of their already deserved reputations).

Of the egghead critics, Kauffmann was the least dogmatic and the least elitist, though he was accused by his detractors of being too "distant," "professorial," or "dispassionate"—too impersonal in his reviews, according to the crusading Kael, to make others want to see the movies he liked. (Would an "impersonal" critic have forgiven many sins in otherwise negligible films, as Kauffmann often did, as long as they had a progressive social message?) Nonetheless, for over fifty years, Stanley Kauffmann wrote about film in *The New Republic* and elsewhere. And since 1967, he had also been teaching film as well as theater and critical writing at the Yale School of Drama, Hunter College, the City

University of New York Graduate Center, and beyond. Kauffmann's own critical style is civilized and easygoing, not chattily egocentric like Kael's, coltishly soul-baring like Sarris's, or Olympianly ironic like Macdonald's. He was a man at home in film history, conversant with culture and the arts generally, informative without being preachy, using his writing to think about his subject and pleased to take us into his confidence.

The internal consistency of Kauffmann's evaluations makes clear that he says what he thinks, though his insights are neither gratuitously shocking nor necessarily innovative, and he does not make a show of himself or battle insistently on behalf of his own reputation. Here, then, was a critic who took films more seriously than he took himself. His stance was anything but a commonplace one among his fellow critics. Indeed, much film criticism still seems to be written by persons who love nothing more than their own persona, or know no other art form. As Kauffmann himself put the matter in a 1965 essay on Pauline Kael in *Harper's Magazine*, he pledged allegiance to "a view of the film as a descendant of the theater and literature, certainly *sui generis* but not without ancestors or cousins, to be judged by its own unique standards which are yet analogous to those of other arts: a view that is pluralistic, aesthetic but not anti-science, contemporary but not unhistorical, and humanistic.[4] Stanley Kauffmann, then, was a man of large interests, great knowledge, and supreme responsibility.

A particular value of his work was his willingness to go against critical consensus. Kauffmann was never intimidated, for example, by precious, arty analyses and endorsements of films that included the French cachet (from *Cahiers du cinéma*) among their number. Nor was he ever overawed by films that won their fame because of their "difficulty," or because they claimed to be "advanced." Just because a film was labeled *nouvelle vague*, or New Wave, and was made by Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Philippe de Broca, Agnès Varda, even Jean Cocteau or Robert Bresson, Kauffmann did not cast aside his obligations as a critic to take on the mantle of a *cineaste*. No matter how big or idolized the director, Kauffmann always strove to separate brouhaha from artistry.

Witness his disliking of *The Serpent's Egg* (1978) despite the fact that he was an Ingmar Bergman fan; his not hesitating to explain why *Perceval* (1978) fails even though he was otherwise an admirer of Éric Rohmer; or, in a *Salmagundi* interview from 1991 (included in *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*), his extended critique of the urbane realism of an otherwise overrated Woody Allen. Witness also the following comeuppances Kauffmann delivered to Luis Buñuel in *A World on Film* in a review of *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955): "He is a master technician with the outlook of a collegiate idealist who has just discovered venality and lust." . . . "Buñuel, the swami of sadism, has now reached the point of self-parody." . . . "Buñuel remains, for me, a highly resourceful technician and a highly neurotic adolescent."[5] Buñuel may have been too old and too far-gone for change by this time (1966), but these harsh words surely gave some "Buñuel-can-do-no-wrong" devotees a prod toward reevaluating their master.

All the pieces on Buñuel in *A World on Film* are grouped together, which is not as trivial an editorial choice as it may sound. Rather, it is symptomatic of Kauffmann's longtime concern with continuity—one that continued up to his last book, *Ten Great Films* (2012). When, in *Before My Eyes* (1980), you read his review of *Family Plot* (1976), you also register the important point that, for all the

encomia about Alfred Hitchcock's style, a Hitchcock film has always stood or stumbled by virtue of its script. An extended essay in the same volume on *8½* (1963) discusses not just that film but also its relation to Federico Fellini's life and its place in the cinematic pantheon as well as the artistic pantheon generally. Writing on the much-awarded *Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978), Kauffmann once again swims against the critical tide by asserting that it is far from top-drawer Ermanno Olmi, and proceeds to explain why by citing much earlier, better films by this director like *Il Posto* (1961) and *The Fiancés* (1963).

No qualifications of such value judgments on Stanley Kauffmann's part are necessary because, in unabashedly, rigorously, thoughtfully, and humanely deploying those principles of value and judgment, he always reached conclusions that were conditional. Responding, for instance, to Susan Sontag's contention, in her famous essay on Godard (from the 1969 book *Styles of Radical Will*), that "just as no absolute, immanent standards can be discovered for determining the composition, duration, and placement of a shot, there can be no truly sound reason for excluding anything from a film,"[6] Kauffmann wrote the following in *Figures of Light* (1971):

> This seemingly staggering statement is only the extreme extension of a thesis that any enlightened person would support: there are no absolutes in art. The Godardians take this to mean (like Ivan Karamazov) that therefore everything is permissible. Others of us take it to mean that therefore standards have to be empirically searched out and continually readjusted, to distinguish art from autism; that, just as responsive morals have to be found without a divine authority if humanity is to survive, so responsive aesthetics have to be found without canonical standards if art is to survive.[7]

Some, in reading Kauffmann's conflation of aesthetic and moral standards above, may choose to see the finger-wagging or millennial doomsaying of a self-appointed cultural gatekeeper. Yet such a conflation is not just an essential tenet for anyone engaged in criticism: it is in addition a sign of the genuine ardor, and the true seriousness (shorn of any sweater-vest insinuations), that Stanley Kauffmann brought to bear in his own writing.

As should anyone who is deeply serious about art, Kauffmann took failings in it as they should be taken: that is, personally. "Fine artists make us feel proprietary about them," he wrote in *Before My Eyes*, apropos of Antonioni's 1975 film *The Passenger*: "They invade us so strongly, become so much a part of the way we look outward and inward, that we can't approach new works of theirs without a sense that we are intimately involved."[8] Kauffmann's aesthetic high-mindedness was of the healthiest variety imaginable, born neither of easy cynicism nor of unthinking adherence to traditional (i.e., fabricated) canonical standards—whose existence, in any salutarily tangible sense, he dismissed as casually as the Almighty's. Such high-minded thinking was premised on a profound disdain of glibness, of posturing, of pretense and laziness and arbitrariness, qualities that are disagreeable enough in other spheres of existence but positively despicable in (what should be) the heightened and heightening realm of art. (The divination of artistic purpose, purpose both worthy and realized, was another of Kauffmann's perennially unfashionable dedications.)

Already during his first full decade as a film critic, Kauffmann had become one of the profession's most admired writers for the directness of his spare prose. He wasted little time in getting to the point. For this reason, *A World on Film* remains one of the best of collections of his movie reviews, even if it was the first. Writing about an Irvin Kershner picture, for example, Kauffmann opened with the following sentence: "*The Luck of Ginger Coffey* [1964] . . . is the sort of work that is vastly overpraised simply because it is not phony."[9] The first sentence of Kauffmann's review of *L'Avventura* (1960) is itself short, simple, and resoundingly dramatic: "At last."[10] Furthermore, compare the heart- and loin-throbbing double-entendre titles of Pauline Kael's collections of film criticism (*I Lost It at the Movies*, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, *Going Steady*, *Deeper into Movies*, *When the Lights Go Down*, *Taking It All In*) with the sober, scrutinizing, ocular-based metaphors of Kauffmann's: *Figures of Light*, *Living Images*, *Before My Eyes*, *Field of View*, *Distinguishing Features*, and finally, simply, *Regarding Film*.)

Apart from the economy of his writing style, breadth of range is another Kauffmann virtue, abundantly on display in *Before My Eyes*. What other critic would begin a review of Robert Altman's *A Wedding* (1978), as Kauffmann does in this book, by relating the film to latter-day European naturalism; in another piece, compare Bergman to Eugene O'Neill; or, in another review, detail the ways in which young German filmmakers of the 1970s utilized American popular culture? Who other than Kauffmann would lay out Lina Wertmüller's options for portraying the Holocaust in *Seven Beauties* (1976) . . . and then explain why she decided on comedy; or indicate his perceptiveness of the pleasures, and occasional profundities, of pop by calling *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) not simply the best science-fiction movie ever made but "an event in the history of faith"[11]? Who else among the critics would notice—as Kauffmann does in *Regarding Film*—in Warren Beatty's *Bulworth* (1998) an unacknowledged debt not only to Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe* (1941) but also to a Finnish film *and* a Ukrainian one; reveal his astute appreciation of the old Hollywood masters by arguing that to place John Ford "among the great directors of the world, as we must, is to see that the 'pure force of genius' is relatively stronger in Ford than in Dickens because Ford had much less freedom of choice and much less control over the finished form of his work"[12]; or discuss, during a single conversation (with Studs Terkel in 1985, included in *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*) about the theater, the subjects of Harold Pinter and acting, Samuel Beckett and Bert Lahr, and Bertolt Brecht and Berlin?

From the perspective of his more than five decades as a critic, nearly four decades as a teacher, and a number of years in-between as an editor, playwright, and novelist, Stanley Kauffmann clearly continued to see films in a broad cultural and historical context that eludes the tunnel-vision reviewers whose only reference points are Hollywood, old movies, and the box office. He was particularly sensitive to the parasitic relationship that middlebrow movies too often have with genuine art. "He's the film equivalent of the advertising-agency art director who haunts the galleries to keep his eye fresh," Kauffmann wrote of Robert Altman in *Before My Eyes*. "The future may judge our age culturally by its high estimate of Altman. Indeed, the nonsense about him is already coming undone."[13]

Reviewing Kauffmann's *Living Images* (1975) a number of years ago, one reviewer suggested that his most salient quality as a critic was that of "raffish

dignity."[14] His raffishness was more wry than pronounced, however, as in the following humorous comment about George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), from *A World on Film*: "Sometimes I am more relieved than at other times that I am not a Christian; these occasions include the experience of most films about Jesus."[15] Kauffmann's raffishness remained as lively as ever, as in the following understatedly but effectively witty comment about *Fargo* (1996), from *Regarding Film* (2001): "The hot news about Joel and Ethan Coen is that they have made a tolerable film."[16] Or, from the same collection, these slicing words about *Touch of Evil*: "[Charlton] Heston's attempts to be a dashing young man were painful even when he was young.[17] Often Kauffmann's opening lines are as amusingly provocative as Pauline Kael's. Witness the following three from *Before My Eyes*: "When François Truffaut has an idea, he makes a film. And sometimes when he doesn't have an idea, he makes a film anyway."[18] . . . "Paddy Chayefsky is the kind of writer who is not an obvious escape-monger or fabricator but a venturer who takes his audience on an interesting tour of anguish and then delivers everyone safely right back to his front door."[19] . . . "One way to pass the time while watching a turkey with big people in it is to wonder why they agreed to do it."[20]

Sometimes, however, Kauffmann's amusing provocativeness or dignified raffishness turns to harsh dismissal. This may be the result of an impatience with stars or directors who keep flourishing despite his low opinion of them, but, from the mid-1970s on, Kauffmann seemed less willing to be gentlemanly. Thus, in *Before My Eyes*, he saw his bugbear Robert Altman as "a walking death sentence on the prospects of American film" and a "public embarrassment," the director's *Quintet* (1979) "paralyzingly stupid."[21] *Shampoo* (1975) struck Kauffmann in the same volume as "disgusting,"[22] while Liza Minnelli in *New York, New York* (1977) resembled a "giant rodent en route to a costume ball."[23] Perhaps for a critic so concerned with film's relationship to larger culture, the many opportunities lost, bungled, or cheapened had come to seem unbearable after years of reviewing.

Even so, as early as 1959, Kauffmann was able to toss off this line in dismissal of Gregory Peck: "He embodies Gordon Craig's ideal of an actor: an *Übermarionette*, wooden to the core."[24] Only two years later—in the same collection of criticism—he had this to say about the performance of Jackie Gleason in *The Hustler*: "It is the best use of a manikin by a director since Elia Kazan photographed Burl Ives as Big Daddy"[25] in 1958's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. And, in 1963, in an interview published by the magazine *Seventh Art*, Kauffmann dismissed *la politique des auteurs*, or the *auteur* theory of film (which holds that the director is the primary "author" of any motion picture), with the following words: "I think it is utterly boring . . . it's for irresponsible children. It bores me even to say as much as I've said."[26]

Whether harsh or generous, Stanley Kauffmann was most certainly a master of the felicitous phrase and memorable characterization. So, in *Regarding Film*, he describes Emma Thompson as the "first film actress since Katharine Hepburn to make intelligence sexy"[27]; he finds in *Amistad* (1997) a sense of "presence in the past"[28] he has not experienced since Bergman's *Virgin Spring* (1960); and he notes that Oliver Stone "in appalling measure"[29] succeeds in *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Kauffmann is acute about a lesser but related film, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which "nourishes, abets, cultural slumming [with] calculated grunginess."[30] And, ever sensitive to cinematography, he writes of *Stalingrad*

(1993) that "the colors don't glamorize, they confirm,"[31] while in the camerawork of *Sister, My Sister* (1994) he finds "the everyday put before us as evidence of strangeness."[32] In *Carrington* (1995), for its part, "appurtenances of class and of conscious bohemianism are integral to the characters themselves, not imposed as décor. Settings and story are unified."[33]

As they were not, for instance, in *Barry Lyndon* (1975). At a time—the last quarter of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first—when gorgeous cinematography had all but overwhelmed intelligent screenwriting, Kauffmann's senses never overpowered his sensibility. Of *Barry Lyndon*, whose visual splendor blinded many critics to its intellectual emptiness, he wrote in *Before My Eyes*: "Stanley Kubrick began professional life as a photographer and has lately been reverting to his first career. His new film very nearly accommodates Zeno's paradox of motion: it seems to remain in one place while actually it is moving ahead. Kubrick has produced three hours and four minutes of pictures."[34] Unlike *auteurists* and other aesthetes, then, Kauffmann understood that films begin where most reviews don't: the screenplay. And he reiterated his belief when he wrote the following in praise of *Charley Varrick* (1973) in *Living Images*: "It was directed by Don Siegel, a great favorite of the *auteur* critics, and it proves yet again that there's nothing wrong with an *auteur* director that a good script [by Howard Rodman and Dean Riesner, as adapted from John Reese's novel *The Looters*] can't cure."[35]

None of the above is to say that Stanley Kauffmann was the kind of film critic who could easily be dismissed as "literary." For example, Kauffmann's ability to engage with non-narrative work that, in his eyes, thoroughly justifies its breaking of conventional cinematic modes through the validity of its artistic purpose, as well as the breadth of its intellectual and technical resources, is evidenced by his piece on Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Our Hitler* (1977), included in *Field of View* (1986). Moreover, Kauffmann reserves his greatest scorn for conventional screenwriters whose own prose never equals their literary aspirations, deftly puncturing the pretensions of, among others, James Toback (*The Gambler*, 1974) and Thomas McGuane (*The Missouri Breaks*, 1976). Kauffmann is also mercilessly attentive to the sort of detail that is usually overlooked in hyperbolic reviews. Reviewing *The Godfather: Part II* in 1975, for example, he patiently noted four gigantic plot holes before adding casually, "And, by the way, the ship on which young Vito is said to be arriving in New York from Sicily is actually leaving New York, sailing south past the Statue of Liberty."[36]

One of the subconscious advantages of being a critic on a "little" magazine like *The New Republic* may be that one feels sufficiently free to tout small films, or neglected art, in addition to covering major releases like the first part of *The Godfather* (1972). Kauffmann always showed this predilection for unheralded work, perhaps never more strongly than in *Before My Eyes*. There Elaine May's barely acknowledged *Mikey and Nicky* (1976) is praised as "an implicitly large film" and "an odd, biting, grinning, sideways-scuttling rodent of a picture"[37] that is the best film by an American woman to date. *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), to Kauffmann's eyes, is the finest film about Vietnam, far above *Coming Home* (released in the same year)—a point that he expands upon during his 1992 interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*[38] with reference to *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). The flaws in *Go Tell the Spartans* are pointed out, to be sure, but so are the wider accomplishments. And so is the acting.

Among Kauffmann's major distinctions from other film critics was a preoccupation with actors. Having been a stage actor himself, he was sensitive to performers while other film critics treated them tangentially, if at all—even if they were icons on the order of Cary Grant or Marilyn Monroe, who had the screen power to shape the force and nature of their films. Kauffmann was the antithesis of those critics who believed that "serious" film criticism had everything to do with theory, genre, politics, *auteurism*, or other theme-couching considerations, and very little to do with the acting leads whom they parenthetically deigned to cite. To word-shoveling spiritual rhapsodists like Pauline Kael and Parker Tyler, then, Burt Lancaster up there on the screen might as well have been Arnold Stang. Even someone normally as judicious as Vernon Young could mindlessly argue that "film criticism can usually afford to disregard actors in a film's total effect, unless they are grossly bad or overwhelmingly good."[39]

As evidence of Stanley Kauffmann's keen interest in screen acting, let's have a look at this critic on the acting of Jane Fonda—someone whose career he had watched from the beginning. He keenly locates the mediocrity of *Coming Home* as the source of Fonda's "crimped" performance: "Her performance seems crimped by the role's careful sterilization. There's nothing much more than Jane Wyman pertness at the start, to which is later added some Elissa Landi soul. I choose '30s references because, under the '68 trappings, a perennial movie-movie is what *Coming Home* is."[40] Such a comment is typical of Kauffmann's criticism and serves as evidence, together with the following nuggets, that he was the only American film critic who had a thorough, incisive appreciation of the performance side of cinema.

From *A World on Film*, sample these remarks comparing Frank Sinatra with Marlon Brando: "The emotion displayed by Sinatra, one feels, is always Sinatra's emotion, not the character's. . . . If it were possible to see Sinatra in Brando's role in *On the Waterfront* [1954], that would clarify the difference between mere simulation and creative acting."[41] In praise of Brenda de Banzie's performance in *The Entertainer* (1960), Kauffmann acerbically wrote, in the same volume, "Her drunk scene is one to which all Studio actors should be taken and held fast by the nape the neck until they have seen it a dozen times." [42] And about Ralph Richardson's performance as the faded matinee idol James Tyrone in Sidney Lumet's film of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962), Kauffmann was not afraid to be stingy, even to a time-honored great, when he wrote in *A World on Film* that the actor "provides a sound performance, instead of the affected distortion that he often palms off as originality. One cannot quite believe that his face ever set feminine hearts aflutter or that he is more than occasionally Irish (when he remembers the brogue); but he drives hard and honestly for the center of this warped, grandiloquent man."[43]

Nor was Kauffmann afraid to praise a performance that other reviewers had damned. In his critique of John Frankenheimer's film version of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1973), from *Living Images*, he lauded the acting of Lee Marvin, whose portrayal of Hickey, many other critics felt, had let the production down—especially in comparison to Jason Robards' legendary stage rendition of this major character. "And to crown the work there is Lee Marvin, as Hickey, the salesman-apostle," Kauffmann wrote:

> To put it simply: Marvin was born to play Hickey. He has the perfect understanding of the man and perfect equipment to deal with it. . . . Marvin understands the bumps and sags, and he lifts it all adroitly with gesture, with vaudevillian's esprit, to present both the man who was and who is. Then comes the payoff, the great last act. Marvin is wonderful. I have seen James Barton, the first Hickey, and Jason Robards (along with others), and though they were both unforgettably good, Marvin goes past them—so powerfully that he makes the crux of the play clearer than I have ever found it before, on stage or page.[44]

Let us now consider Stanley Kauffmann on the creative acting of Paul Newman—a performer who appeared alongside Lee Marvin in *Pocket Money* (1972), and whose work Kauffmann had early celebrated, in *A World on Film*, in a dual review of Robert Rossen's *The Hustler* (1961) and Martin Ritt's *Paris Blues* (1961). The following passage comes from an interview with Kauffmann that appeared in *Film Heritage* in the fall of 1972:

> Paul Newman is much more subtle than he's given credit for being. . . . If I could take clips from *Sometimes a Great Notion* [1971] and *Pocket Money* and show them to you side by side, figuratively, I think I could demonstrate what I mean about subtlety of imagination working its way out through vocal inflection, physical attitudes, personality aura, and all the other factors that go towards subtle delineation. Newman *. . . thinks* differently in his pictures. It's not a question of a stock company actor putting on hook nose and beard and becoming "somebody else," a man of a thousand faces or anything like that—that's easy. Newman works from a core outward, differently. And you would find, I believe, that his whole system of timing was different in *Pocket Money* from what it was in the logging picture, *Sometimes a Great Notion*.[45]

Lastly in the acting department, consider this analysis, from *Regarding Film*, of the two stars who have played Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (1962, 1997): "James Mason is the ideal Humbert. He gives us a doomed man, conscious of it, accepting it. . . . [Jeremy] Irons in the role [gives] it his customary vestments of intelligence and sensitive reticence, but at his deepest he is no more than melancholy. Mason suggested a tragic fall."[46] As for the difference between a comic performer and a comic actor, Kauffmann replies in *A World on Film*: "A performer is a person who does things to make you laugh; an actor creates a character at whose actions and utterances you laugh."[47] To Kauffmann, Peter Ustinov and Peter Sellers were comic performers; Alec Guinness and Jack Lemmon were comic actors. Of the "comic" Lemmon, Kauffmann went on presciently to say the following—also from *A World on Film*—about his performance in Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960): "Jack Lemmon is the kind of problem American films need. He is a vigorous, highly talented, and technically equipped actor with a wide emotional range. Can Hollywood supply him with material that is good enough for him?"[48]

Probably most important in any consideration of Stanley Kauffmann's critical virtues is that, while many of his fellow reviewers were carried away on their own waves of rhetorical bluster, or blurby hyperbole, during the last few

decades of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first—particularly in their undiscriminating remarks about film acting—he did not forget the real duty or responsibility of a critic. Which is to exercise his judgment in the service of art, not to try desperately to substitute rhetorical fireworks for the experience of art, or to attempt to create masterpieces by fiat rather than discover them by careful observation. To be sure, Kauffmann was not afraid to generalize from his detailed observations, though he was always careful to avoid the thesis-mongering that too often passes these days for cultural criticism.

For his part, he avoided such axe-grinding. Letting his aesthetics flow into his morality, without dichotomy, Kauffmann thus explored movies in order to search out the universality of their subject matter, the artistry of their technique, and the ethical force that makes some art objects greater than others. He wonderfully does all three in a review of that difficult yet impressive film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), where, neither blinded by its technique nor alienated by its innovation, he could lucidly and sympathetically locate its artistic impulse at the same time as he had to conclude, "After *Marienbad*, I knew more about Alain Resnais and Resnais's search for reality; but after *La Notte* [1961] and *L'Avventura* I knew more about myself."[49]

Kauffmann's description of Harry Alan Potamkin, in a thoughtful appreciation of the late Marxist critic, could equally apply to himself: "He judged film by its own criteria, certainly . . . but criteria no more lax or unbuttoned than those that any good critic would apply to any other art." Unfortunately, as Kauffmann noted in this piece from *Before My Eyes*, "The assumption, then and now, is that such an approach precludes appreciation of good popular film. Or that such an approach marks the 'literary' film critic."[50] Perhaps this was too sour a view of the cinematic landscape in the late 1970s. But it is none too sour a view from the vantage point of 2016. If anyone is beleaguered these days, it is critics with taste and intelligence—like the late Stanley Kauffmann—who bring to their work a *littérateur's* perspective on narrative structure and character development, who use their cultural appetite to make thematic connections between movies (the most populist art form) and literature, and who, pedagogically speaking, focus less on the sociological or political implications of a film than on the quality of its artistic expression.

Still, Kauffmann felt considerably less beleaguered than most of his fellow film critics; and, as he pointed out in his interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, "The serious critic . . . who can't enjoy what to him is an entertainment film, is lacking in full capacity for enjoying the best film, I think."[51] As Kauffmann himself would have agreed, the fact that a Japanese film by Yasujiro Ozu does not run very long in America's biggest city doesn't prove any more about the status of the art and its audience than the fact that Athol Fugard's drama *Boesman and Lena* (1969) didn't break the attendance record set by *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), or that John Berryman's *Dream Songs* (1964) did not outsell the pop poetry of Rod McKuen. It is not so much that Kauffmann was sanguine about the state of the cinema at any particular time; rather, he knew that masterpieces in any form in any age are few and far between, and that a responsible critic must exercise the same judgment in the valleys as on the peaks. In the meantime, he was hardly waiting around for the next great work of art to appear, or for an old master miraculously to regain his powers.

Indeed, Kauffmann's powers of discernment are perhaps most evident in his writing about films that were far from being total successes; he is capable of simultaneously appreciating their virtues (often limited) and deploring their shortcomings (often considerable). "*Julia* is irresistible," he confessed in 1977. "Tears must flow. Mine certainly did. But this is not to say that it's really good. In fact, if it were *really* good, tears might flow less, perhaps not at all. *Julia* is first-class middlebrow beautified filmmaking."[52] Or consider, from 1978, this vintage-Kauffmann criticism of Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*:

> He brought over Nestor Almendros for this film and has proved, by doing this, the last thing he wanted to prove: there is no such thing as an artist-cinematographer; there are only good cinematographers who sometimes work for artists. And when the director is weak, as Malick is here, he tends to lean more and more on the good cinematographer's ability, and so swamps the film in pretty pictures.[53]

In the end, Stanley Kauffmann's film writing creates the kind of evocative and sensitive critical world that recharges a work of art while searching out and probing its parts. He does not merely mediate between his readers and the artwork; he allows the play of his intelligence to respond to the force of that work, using language to capture the thrust of a film and test it against its own possibilities. At his best, Kauffmann responds to the cinema, in Henry James's phrase, with "perception at the pitch of passion."[54] Agreement with him matters less than recognition of his ability to summon up the memory of films enjoyed; to evoke the pleasure of, and build up appetite for, films unseen; and, on privileged occasions, to change our long-held but nonetheless obsolete critical estimates, or to make us reflect for the first time on the magic of being born at a time when the arrival of film could transform one's life. Without the movies, writes Kauffmann in *Regarding Film*, "Josef von Sternberg might have spent his life in the lace business; Howard Hawks might have remained an engineer . . . [David] Lean might have browned out his life as a London accountant."[55] So too did Stanley Kauffmann discover film criticism, and apply himself to it, at precisely the right time.

The right time, the late 1950s and early 1960s, was also when Kauffmann became one of the first film critics to use television as a means of consistently investigating film culture, as he brought an erudite brand of criticism to the public airwaves. Stanley Kauffmann was the host of "The Art of Film" on the old WNDT-TV, based in Newark, New Jersey, from 1963 to 1967. (WNDT merged with the National Educational Television [NET] in 1970, when the Public Broadcasting Service was formed, and became PBS's New York affiliate, WNET-TV, Channel 13.) On this program—which in 1964 won a local New York-area Emmy Award for general excellence—he conducted serious discussions regarding the techniques and artistry of filmmaking with guests who included directors and screenwriters like Michelangelo Antonioni and Harold Pinter, as well as producers and actors. Film clips were interspersed to illustrate points in a documentary-like manner, rather than being used as they mostly were in later years: as free advertising by studios trying to plug their newest releases. As much as his reviews in *The New Republic* and the books that anthologized them, "The Art of Film" thus helped to establish Kauffmann's reputation as a critic of perception and power.

As if his television commentary and print reviewing of film were not enough, Stanley Kauffmann was even a frontline drama critic for a time, starting in the 1960s, for *The New York Times* and *Saturday Review* among other publications. (Indeed, from 1963 to 1965, he served as both the drama and film critic for the public television station in Newark, WNDT.) Kauffmann stopped writing regular theater criticism in 1985 but continued to write film criticism until his death in 2013. And the present volume, *Outtakes: Collected Film Essays and Reviews from Six Decades*, contains a selection of that film criticism—arranged chronologically, by section, from the earliest piece to the latest. These previously uncollected pieces from the 1950s to the 2000s were selected on the basis of their international as well as national (American) representativeness, and with the idea in mind of creating a balance between prominent film directors and those less prominent or relatively early in their careers.

Included in *Outtakes*, then, are reviews of such new and notable fiction features (at the time of their initial American release) as Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run*, Louis Malle's *Murmur of the Heart*, Marcel Camus's *Black Orpheus*, Orson Welles's *Mr. Arkadin*, Federico Fellini's *City of Women*, Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society*, Satyajit Ray's *Days and Nights in the Forest*, and Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table*; reviews of first films by artists like Albert Finney and Philip Haas; books about the movie directors Fritz Lang and Lindsay Anderson; several reconsiderations of classic films such as Victor Fleming's *Gone With the Wind,* Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*, and David Lean's *A Passage to India*; remembrances of late, distinguished film actors such as Stan Laurel and Charles Denner; and ruminations on such important subjects as film acting and the relationship between theater and film.

In *Outtakes*, as in his previous collections, Kauffmann regularly comments on the nature, as well as what can be called (with the advent of the Internet) the crisis, of film criticism, as he does on such subjects as the function of criticism, the qualifications of a critic, the influence or power of critics, newspaper reviewing versus magazine criticism versus academic scholarship, and critical theory as opposed to critical practice. Other topics routinely touched on in Kauffmann's work include the relationship between theater and film, particularly the difference between stage and screen acting; children and the cinema and the phenomenon of child actors; the relationship between novels and the movies made from them; Shakespeare and the cinema; sex and sexuality as well as realism, taste, and violence in film; the pleasures, and treasures, of documentary film; various national cinemas (among them those of Brazil, Cuba, and the Netherlands); the extent to which cinema seems embedded in French culture more than in any other; the phenomenon of film festivals; the persistence of American independent filmmakers in the face of the commercial behemoth of Hollywood; the ostensible "death of film" in the age of digital cinema; and the issue of government subsidy for the cinema in particular and for the arts in general.

Let me conclude by mentioning a long, lovely piece that Stanley Kauffmann wrote in tribute to (the still-living) John Gielgud in 1977 (and included in *Before My Eyes*), in which he took issue with Brecht's admonition in his play *Life of Galileo* (1938-47) that "Unhappy is the land that needs a hero."[56] "Unknown is the land that needs no hero. Unknown is the interior land that needs no hero," Kauffmann retorts:

> Brecht's line becomes even more doubtful when we see that what we have chiefly left to cheer us, in the whirl and disorder of our days, are some heroes, heroines: not mouthers of ideals but practitioners of excellence, men and women who have made personal worlds in which the centers hold. They help us. And excellence that gives us a model, however distantly analogous to our lives, is a testament of possibility. Art is still one locus of such excellence, whichever art it is that speaks to you most directly.[57]

Beyond the exquisite, carefully chosen phrasing whose ease belies its exceedingly precise construction, beyond the unerring sense of rhythm and cadence that punctuates a luxuriously unspooling flow of words, concepts, and imagery with short, sharp, functional little phrases ("They help us"), there is also in the above passage something fundamental to Kauffmann's writing as a whole—and something that went largely unremarked upon in the many respectful tributes to the longtime *New Republic* critic upon his death in October 2013 at the age of ninety-seven. That something, simply put, is drama: in the sweeping sense of scale that cannot be concealed behind the cool judiciousness of the prose, and in the utterly serious conviction that art, in its many and variegated forms, is playing for the highest stakes imaginable. Hence Kauffmann's critical writing is not only evaluation (though it is that, incisively), not only enthusiasm (though it is that, fervently); it is engagement, of a rare (not rarefied) variety: of a writer who has refined his craft, sharpened his perceptions, and through them broadened his range of response and feeling in celebrating an artist, Gielgud, whose work validates what he knows the medium to be capable of but so seldom achieves.

"Thus my account of debt, or a sketch of it," Kauffmann ends his encomium to John Gielgud. "There a vision of a theater, of a film, better than has been available to him most of his career, thus a vision of is rigor in his life (says his acting), there is—consciously or not—the world better than the one he lives in. And thus, implicitly, he performs the fundamental function of art: to criticize life."[58] If the role of art is to criticize life, then Stanley Kauffmann ceaselessly demonstrated that criticism can be a way, for those to whom it speaks most directly, to live a life in art.

Notes

[1]Wolcott Gibbs, *More in Sorrow* (New York: Henry Holt, 1958), 268.
[2]Stanley Kauffmann, *A World on Film: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 415.
[3]Bert Cardullo, ed., *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 168.
[4]Stanley Kauffmann, "Focus on Film Criticism: *I Lost It at the Movies*, by Pauline Kael, " *Harper's Magazine* 230 (June 1965): 114.
[5]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 352.
[6]Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Dell, 1969), 176.
[7]Stanley Kauffmann, *Figures of Light: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 110-111.
[8]Stanley Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York:

Harper & Row, 1980), 121.
[9]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 128.
[10]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 299.
[11]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 155.
[12]Stanley Kauffmann, *Distinguishing Features: Film Criticism and Comment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 224.
[13]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 47.
[14]Stephen R. Lawson, "Book Review of *Living Images*," *Theater* 6.3 (Spring 1975): 73.
[15]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 28.
[16]Stanley Kauffmann, *Regarding Film: Film Criticism and Comment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 83.
[17]Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 172.
[18]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 189.
[19]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 101.
[20]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 207.
[21]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 47.
[22]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 116.
[23]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 203.
[24]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 11.
[25]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 58.
[26]Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 3.
[27]Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 11.
[28]Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 31.
[29]Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 48.
[30]Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 61.
[31]Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 73.
[32]Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 75.
[33]Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 78.
[34]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 180.
[35]Stanley Kauffmann, *Living Images: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 241.
[36]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 106.
[37]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 272.
[38]Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 182-183.
[39]Edward Murray, *Nine American Film Critics* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1975), 199.
[40]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 120.
[41]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 48.
[42]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 185.
[43] Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 75-76.
[44]Kauffmann, *Living Images*, 240.
[45]Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 42-43.
[46]Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 124.
[47]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 51.
[48]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 149.
[49]Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 249.
[50]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 376-377.
[51]Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 163.

[52]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 294.
[53]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 322.
[54]Henry James, "Criticism," in his *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 264.
[55]Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 226.
[56]Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, trans. Charles Laughton (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 115.
[57]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 406.
[58]Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 412.

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FILM REVIEWS

Directors on Display

Strawberry and Chocolate, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 6 February 1995)

In 1983 a documentary called *Improper Conduct*, co-directed by the late Nestor Almendros, exposed the harassment of gays in Castro's Cuba. A new film, *Strawberry and Chocolate*, is a fictional work about gay life in Cuba that deals with less patent forms of harassment. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, who co-directed it with Juan Carlos Tabío, is safely ensconced in cinema history with *Memories of Underdevelopment*. In that 1968 film Alea explored spiritual malaise in the midst of revolutionary fervor with extraordinary candor and artistry. He has been active in the intervening years, but it's his latest film, *Strawberry and Chocolate*, that quite understandably has drawn most attention.

The screenplay is by Senel Paz, adapted from one of his own stories, and, with the prerogatives of art, it treats its theme with subtleties that were not available to Almendros in a documentary. Almendros was protesting injustice. Paz, like many people who live under oppressive governments, gay or otherwise, is interested in how people breathe, grow, protect themselves in such a world.

The story opens with a young man and woman, in Havana, going to a hotel to make love. This sequence leads to another with a sardonic twist that a wit like Molnár would have enjoyed. Let's just say that love is not made. The young man, called David, alone and disconsolate, has an ice cream in a café—chocolate. Another young man, called Diego, who more or less flaunts his gayness, sits down at the same table with a strawberry ice cream. Diego makes conversation. David resists entanglement; but Diego is clever, and eventually David is inveigled into going to Diego's apartment with him.

We, wised up as we are by filmgoing, are sure that David, disappointed in women, will succumb to Diego's advances. Not so. Instead, beginning that day and continuing thereafter, we get what David, a fervent Marxist, would call a dialectical relationship between himself and Diego, an apolitical aesthete. David is a university student, socially committed; Diego is a photographer who wants only to live an artistically and emotionally fulfilling life. The continuing tension that arises out of their sexual difference only heightens the dialectics.

Other people are involved, chiefly a Castro helot who is David's friend and neighbor. Police agents and spies do not appear, yet we get a clear sense throughout of privacies being played out in an intensely politicized community.

The directors have comprehended the qualities in Paz's script, which they helped to prepare, and have drawn them out delicately—no heavy underlining. Just when we may be feeling that we are traveling down the well-worn road of the homosexual who aims at the unacknowledged latency in a straight, some jolt of character or thought or atmosphere reminds us that this story is not just a re-upholstered cliché.

The two principal roles have been extremely well cast. Vladimir Cruz, as David, is straightforward with an acute combination of seriousness and naïveté. But the part calls for several kinds of honesty, which Cruz provides. The complex acting comes from Jorge Perrugoría as Diego. An exceptionally handsome man and gifted actor, Perrugoría plays Diego as a man who will not conceal his gayness (neither does a friend of his); he loves its style, and that style is his form of courage. We all have read about homosexual men in wartime who were especially courageous because they wanted to show that gays are not ipso facto weak and cowardly. They were at least as admirable as any straight military hero. Diego's courage is more social. His swish—or whatever the word is in Spanish—is to him what the white plume is to Cyrano.

***Guantanamera*, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1995 (*The New Republic*, 28 July 1997)**

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, who died last year, was and is the best-known Cuban filmmaker, before or since Castro. Among Alea's films that were shown in the United States, two were especially impressive: *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993), a gentle, empathic treatment of homosexuality, and *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), about a bourgeois sybarite encountering the new Cuba.

Both pictures were to some degree surprising, in view of their provenance. A friendly account of a gay man was unexpected under Cuban rule; only a few years earlier Nestor Almendros had made a documentary indicting Cuba's persecution of homosexuals. And *Memories of Underdevelopment*, which I saw again recently—it's the film that won Alea an international reputation—clearly reveals Antonioni's influence in tempo and introspection; and Antonioni is not exactly an exemplar of Marxist vigor. Adding to the surprise of these films is the fact that Alea was no political dissident; he was an early and devoted supporter of Castro.

Continuing the paradox, here is Alea's latest and last film, which chuckles at the revolutionary state—something like the Ilf-Petrov *Twelve Chairs*, a 1928 Soviet novel that Alea transposed to Cuba and filmed early in his career (1962). *Guantanamera* means "The Woman of Guantanamo," but it refers to the city, not the U.S. naval base. It was written by Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío, with Eliseo Alberto Diego; Alea and Tabío, who had collaborated previously, directed. Here we have an amiable comedy-romance that centers on a corpse—the troubles in transporting a coffin across Cuba to the right cemetery. (And here, too, there's an Alea precedent, a satirical comedy called *Death of a Bureaucrat* [1966]—about burial errors.)

Adolfo (played by Carlo Cruz) is a fortyish pompous bureaucrat in Guantanamo. He is married to a retired professor of economics, Georgina (played by Mirtha Ibarra, Alea's wife). Georgina's elderly aunt, a famous singer known as Guantanamera, comes home to visit and dies in the embrace of her childhood sweetheart, Candido (played by Raúl Eguren). The aunt's coffin must cross Cuba to her cemetery of choice, and the puffy Adolfo is in charge of the meager two-car cortege. Of course mishaps occur, most of them through the tangles of Communist bureaucracy.

One non-political tangle is Georgina's accidental meeting with a former student of hers, Mariano (Jorge Perrugoría, familiar from *Strawberry and Chocolate*). Mariano, now a truck driver, had something more than a crush on his teacher, and she has treasured a note he wrote her when he left school. Mariano knows plenty of attractive women along his trucking route—apparently he moves from bed to bed as he delivers the goods—but the fresh sight of Georgina makes him look at love and life differently.

All through the cortege's trip, officialdom hinders progress. But counterpointed with these troubles are the colors of Cuban personality—from silliness to triumphant warmth—colors that, Alea seems to say, persist in Cuba under any regime. The finish of the film is guessable, but by then the people and the plots have become so comfy that we want the added comfort of a predictable ending.

Ibarra is an actress of resource, charm, and mature sex appeal. Perrugoría is so attractive that we don't bother to wonder about the future of this young man and this markedly older woman. And there's a modestly wise performance by Eguren as the dead woman's sweetheart who waited all his life for her to come back, only to have her die in his arms, and who now accompanies her coffin because, as he figures it, fidelity is fidelity.

What keeps *Guantanamera* entertaining, what makes it more than a series of gags, good or otherwise, is the Alea-Tabío feeling for the people. In the manner of some French comedies of the 1930s, this film finds an engaging way of bragging

about its country, warts and all.

Take the Money and Run, Woody Allen, 1969 (*The New Republic*, 13 September 1969)

Several reviews of Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run* have said that it's funny for an hour or so, then runs down. I disagree. It simply runs on. If you came in during the picture and saw the second half first, it would be just as funny as the first half is for those who see it from the beginning. Allen, who is the co-author, director, and star, is a witty man, but he is a stand-up comedian, a performer whose basic method is that of the fisherman: he comes out and casts his lines a number of times, trying to catch as many laughs as possible. After a while, he quits, hoping that his average has been high.

Allen's longer efforts are just larger numbers of tries. This is painfully clear in his current Broadway comedy, *Play It Again, Sam*, which is a revue sketch cancerously overgrown. His film is much better because Allen has clever schemes about the medium itself, where he has none at all about the theater. In fact, if the picture were to be saddled with a theme, it would be the penetration by media-forms into our fantasies: film hits, TV interviews, TV quiz games, TV commercials.

Once again he is the bespectacled shnook, this time the shnook as criminal. We never believe for a moment that Allen is a criminal—as we can believe, at least partially, that Keaton is a Confederate railroad engineer in *The General* (1926)—so the fun is all conscious comment. This means that the comment has to keep coming; there is little chance for dramatic understructure in the comedy. And this, plus the fact that Allen doesn't even seem to sense the need for cumulation and growth, makes the picture a series of items, good or less good. But a lot of them are funny.

Janet Margolin is appealing as the doe-eyed Bonnie to this clumsy Clyde. Allen's direction is competent enough; at least the camera always looks where it ought to look in order to get the laugh. My guess is that he owes considerable to Ralph Rosenblum, the film editor, who was "editorial consultant." I think I even saw Rosenblum make a brief appearance, rising through the sidewalk in a freight elevator.

Radio Days, Woody Allen, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 9 March 1987)

An uncle of mine was the first one in our family to buy a radio, in the mid-1920s, and once a week all the rest of us trooped up to the Bronx to listen to it. I was eight or nine, and though I cant remember the programs, I remember the miracle—also the smell of the set when it heated up. Within a few months our household had its own set, and I felt that we had become members of a public secret society. We were privy now to messages floating invisibly all around us, that were in the very air we breathed.

Woody Allen's *Radio Days* begins about fourteen years later, when radio was still king. As usual in an Allen period piece, the atmospherics are first class. The clothes and rooms and cars are easy enough to get; but Allen recaptures the way people lived by the radio, as a skin diver lives by his snorkel. (Television expanded this feeling, of course, but it lacked a basic novelty: society—people's

homes—had already been electronically linked.) The cinematographer, Carlo Di Palma, re-creates precisely the lighting of broadcasting studios, a light that both embalmed and enhanced. In the mid-1940s I wrote and directed a network radio show, and I can vouch for Di Palma's uncanny authenticity. That light, unlike TV studio lighting, was just part of the workplace, or, if there was a studio audience, part of the hype. Santo Loquasto, the designer, gets fun out of the fact that, when there was an audience, the actors often worked against a background display that pushed the sponsor's product.

Another asset of the film is that Allen isn't in it. He narrates; and though names have been changed, we are meant to assume, from the first-person narration, that the Jewish family we see in their Rockaway Beach home represents Allen's family. (Please consider that the obligatory comparison with Neil Simon's *Brighton Beach Memoirs* [film, 1986]—same period, same social group—has been made, and we'll move on.) The core of the film is the effect that certain radio shows had on various members of the family and their friends. The script is made up of a series of (mostly) self-contained episodes, with little continuity, and Allen gets much out of what was being imagined as against what the actors really looked like.

This latter element leads to a structural defect. Allen doesn't stick to the listeners' end of things; he takes us into the lives of some of the radio performers. Thus *Radio Days* splits right down the middle, between social history and show-biz anecdotes. If Allen had stayed with the former and explored it further, the film might have been stronger; most of the latter are familiar or strained. Even some of the Rockaway episodes have nothing to do with radio, such as one in which a young woman discovers that her date is homosexual and one in which a member of the family goes next door to rebuke some Communist neighbors and comes back two hours later a slogan-slinging Red. But Allen makes good Rockaway use of quiz shows. There are also Westerns, the Orson Welles Martian broadcast, and more.

Mia Farrow, who did a sharp Mafia tootsie in *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), settles here for a trite caricature here as a nightclub cigarette girl. Tony Roberts, the son of a well-known announcer of the period, seems utterly at ease as an announcer. David Warrilow, one of Samuel Beckett's favorite actors, is miscast as a breakfast-show host: no such host ever sounded British or even upper-class American. Allen's self-hate leaks out yet again in the casting of "his" family. All of them are strikingly plain, except one spinster aunt, nicely played by Dianne Wiest; and that aunt is made both nearsighted and unlucky in love.

Radio Days joins *Zelig* (1983), *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982), and *Stardust Memories* (1980), to name only a few, as another Allen film that starts well and thins out because the scriptwriter depended too much on the director. Allen, the director, has become competent; Allen, the writer, still doesn't ask the screenplay enough tough questions before the shooting begins.

Another Woman, Woody Allen, 1988 (*The New Republic*, 21 November 1988)

What Woody Allen is injuring these days is our regard for his intelligence. All his previous films except *Interiors* (1978) have obviously had a bright man behind them, no matter what the success of the individual film. Always the undeluded Allen had shrewd perceptions about his society and had attempted, well or less well, to embody them in film. But with *September* (1987) and now with *Another Woman*, he has stopped looking at his world. He now looks at films, mostly

by Ingmar Bergman.

Many a good artist has modeled himself on a previous artist. To speak only of film history, consider Truffaut and Renoir, Peckinpah and Ford, Bergman himself and Sjöström. But in each of these cases, the younger artist used his model as a means to explore his own experience, not to imitate the other's experience. I know a woman who was in a famous ballet teacher's class in the year when *The Red Shoes* (1948) was first seen. One day, this woman told me, a newcomer arrived in the studio and persuaded the teacher to let her join the class. The newcomer then put on a pair of red ballet slippers. These were her only asset. She had seen the film, and she thought that, if she just put on a pair of red shoes in a ballet class, she would dance like Moira Shearer. That woman was an inexperienced nut case: Allen is neither. Still he has taken his red shoes from Bergman films and thinks that merely by putting on the accoutrements he will be a similar artist.

It is not intelligent: to think that, merely by repeatedly mentioning some of the dilemmas of existence, one has confronted them as Bergman does; that the choice of such subjects means that one can disregard organic structure and cumulative drama (which Bergman never disregards); or to think that serious intent demands pompous diction. ("You're capable of such a lack of feeling," a man says to his lover in the middle of a quarrel.) It's not even intelligent to engage Bergman's cinematographer, Sven Nykvist, magical though he is: it seems a pathetic, desperately imitative move.

Above all, it is not intelligent to think, as Allen apparently does, that comedy is categorically a lower form than drama or tragedy and that a serious filmmaker must strive upward to the higher forms. Allen seems to have made his last two films, as he made *Interiors*, because he thought that wit would not fulfill the seriousness in him. This, if true, is a grave misreading of himself and of the dominant national tenor of our time. The most significant American playwrights and screenwriters these days, Shepard and Mamet among them, are incisive, satiric rather than unrelievedly somber. One reason for the international success of Allen's comedies, I believe, is that they are part of that national tenor, authentic to us and fascinating to others.

But *Another Woman*, quite aside from its flaws of structure and diction, strives uncomfortably to be dark, "European," rather than indigenous. (A classy musical décor of Satie, Weill, and Mahler—rather than the Gershwin in Allen's past—confirms this urge.) All the items above reflect fundamentally on Allen's intelligence. The title is meant to be a double entendre. Gena Rowlands plays a woman turning fifty who finds that her new husband is involved with another woman just at the time when, because of her birthday, she feels herself becoming another woman. Of this reasonably interesting proposition Allen makes nothing at all. Portentous devices, like psychoanalytic sessions next door overheard in Rowlands' workroom, flashbacks to various periods in her life, are all just apparatus (mostly Bergman-derived), polished up and used to no affective end. We are meant to be impressed merely by the profundity in Allen's choice of apparatus. Rowlands' inner crisis ends suddenly, she is "at peace," when she reads a new novel in which she is a character. Even this possible theme—a person who feels her life somewhat justified by its realization in an artwork—is snapped off quickly with a supposed resonance that is merely a hollow click.

Rowlands' career is a series of earnest efforts, never really successful because she is more earnest than talented. She delivers emotional and reflective

statements, with fairly appropriate vocal colors and facial expressions, but the all-important transformative element is quite lacking. Here she is further handicapped because she plays a professor of philosophy, and her commonplace, slurred speech fights the image. No, I don't think that all philosophy teachers are eloquent; but if we're told that a woman is a distinguished philosopher and if she speaks as Rowlands does, some explanation is needed.

Allen has once again studded his cast with famous people, not all of them actors. Among the professionals, that excellent actor Ian Holm, the husband, suffers most; he seems puzzled as to why he is present or what he's supposed to provide. The actor who does best is Gene Hackman as a friend who wants Rowlands to marry him instead of Holm. In a few scenes Hackman creates a man hopelessly in love.

Manhattan Murder Mystery, Woody Allen, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 4 October 1993)

Woody Allen makes two kinds of films: those completely of his own devising (*Annie Hall* [1977], *Manhattan* [1979]) and those patently modeled on predecessors (*Stardust Memories* [1980], *Interiors* [1978], homages to Fellini and Bergman respectively). His new one, *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, is in the latter group: it's based on The Movies. It's the sort of comedy-mystery that we associate with Bob Hope (*The Cat and the Canary* [1939], etc.) but that in fact antedated Hope by decades. And Allen ends his story in a movie theater, behind a screen on which *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) is showing. Allen's finish is braided with the famous house-of-mirrors finish in the Welles film. There's even an echo of Everett Sloane's canes in *The Lady*, with a cane used by a woman in Allen's film.

The tone and milieu are still Allen—Manhattan Jewish with lots of Allen's Manhattan Jewish humor—but to a greater degree than usual with him, the picture is plotty. The screenplay by Allen and Marshall Brickman is, like most screenplays in this genre, an arrangement. A lot of unexpected things have to happen in the course of such a picture, arranged so that they can all be explained at the end. This kind of romp-mystery doesn't exist to be satisfactorily solved but to provide laughs and shocks throughout, which this one does. In fact, we don't even really care much about the solution, as long as the explanation is gotten through fairly quickly. Anjelica Huston handles it here, briskly.

Diane Keaton, after a sixteen-year absence from the Allen fold, rejoins him, playing his wife. He is an editor at HarperCollins. They have a college-age son and have neighbors in their apartment house who are seemingly nice. (Seemingly. Oho!) He and she are floating along in middle age. Keaton, to busy herself, is thinking of opening a restaurant, possibly with Alan Alda, a newly single friend. Instead she opens a murder case, with the help of Alda.

The trouble begins with the sudden death by coronary of a woman who lived down the hall with her husband of twenty-eight years. Suspicion grows in Keaton's mind, despite Allen's dismissals, that foul play was involved. He keeps trying to calm her down with lots of Allen gags, like suggesting that she save a little craziness for menopause. But she persists, is proved right in her suspicions, and then Allen, too, gets entangled in the case.

It all moves quickly and, within the limits of comedy-mystery reason, logically. The laugh lines are frequent. (Keaton drags Allen to a performance of *The*

Flying Dutchman, and he insists on leaving, saying that after he listens to Wagner for a while, he feels like invading Poland.) Allen's directing skills are as good as they have latterly become, except for some vestiges of the hand-held camera flummery that so addled *Husbands and Wives* (1992). He contrives to include, too, some of his continuing adoration of Manhattan; for instance, under the credits he uses a Cole Porter ode to New York sung by our Bard Laureate, Bobby Short.

To a surprising degree, Keaton manages to belie her age, or aging, by holding to her familiar flaky style, riffing on every line with interjections and repetitions, almost persuading us that she is the same old (young) Keaton. Will she some day play grandmothers who riff? Alda is amiable as the friend who almost becomes a corner in a triangle. Huston has a small part as an author of Allen's and convinces us utterly that she is a woman of experience and resource. Also, she is strikingly dressed.

The picture's one big drawback, which keeps it from being completely amusing, is Allen's performance. He cannot act. He never could act. There's no sign, at this late date, that he ever will be able to act. He is a desperate, frantic amateur. He proved this, if it needed proving, when he played in someone else's script in *Scenes from a Mall* (1991). His amateurishness is slightly mitigated in his own films because we're aware that he is the author of the funny lines he's speaking. But the contrast between the professional writer and the amateur actor is off-putting.

His part here, through most of the picture, consists of "Yes, but" acting. Character A (Keaton in this case) embarks on a certain course and Character B (Allen) tries to dissuade. His dialogue consists of a lot of lines like "Yes, but how do you know? How can you possibly—" as Keaton overrides him. "Yes, but" acting needs a clear follow-through in the mind of a performer, some idea of the person who exists while the other character is speaking. Allen just interrupts on cue, gesticulates and flubbers until Keaton drives on, and then semaphores painfully banal signs of impatience until his next cue comes. There's no one home there. It's Amateur Night. What the part needed was Dustin Hoffman or Richard Dreyfuss. They are actors, not writers who think they know their material so well that of course they can perform it.

***Deconstructing Harry*, Woody Allen, 1997 (*The New Republic*, 19 January 1998)**

At last Woody Allen's appearance in a leading role serves a purpose. Unintended, perhaps, but effective. In *Deconstructing Harry*, Allen's latest, his acting is, as always, coarse and repetitive, accompanied constantly by so much hand-wagging that he seems the victim of St. Vitus. But Harry, the Jewish New York novelist whom he plays, is such a despicable, exploitative, deceptive egotist that an authentic performance of the role—say, by Dustin Hoffman—would have made him unbearable. As we watch Allen we know that the part is not intended to be credible, like the other roles in the film: it's just an occasion for Allen's shtick. Harry is a convenience to make the film possible, as is the fact that so many women have been mad about him. Even the hooker we see is sympathetic to him.

Still, Allen's cartoon acting is all the more noticeable because he is surrounded by so many good actors. Or maybe, because Harry is so dreadful, Allen's cartoon acting now seems more egregious in these surroundings. Judy

Davis has the opening scene with him, an ex-girlfriend who is murderously angry because Harry has utilized their relationship in his new novel; and Davis is excellent. Demi Moore, as a former wife who became devoutly Jewish, to Harry's discomfort, is funny. Kirstie Alley, as another former wife, very hostile, steams through her scenes. Other pleasing performances come from Caroline Aaron, Billy Crystal, and Elisabeth Shue. Richard Benjamin is at ease as one of Harry's autobiographical characters in a novel. Robin Williams amuses as a character in one of Harry's short stories that might have come from Ben Hecht.

These last two characters appear in some of the several episodes that are reenactments of Harry's fiction. Late in the film Harry confronts several of his characters in the, shall we say, flesh, but this is not a Pirandellian venture. It occurs simply because Allen needs more material to keep his film going.

All that really happens in the film's present tense is that Harry goes upstate to his university to be honored. He kidnaps his small son, who lives with the divorced mother, to accompany him on this trip. His affection for his son is Harry's one positive quality; yet he also pays a hooker in hot pants $500 to go along with them. (A great pal for his son, yes?) The university ceremony is stymied for various reasons, but Allen, perhaps touching his Fellini file, has it happen anyway in a dream sequence; the ceremony is held and all the people in his life, including his fictional characters, attend.

Deconstructing Harry is really just a series of sketches, but many of them are amusing because this Manhattan Punchinello works with competent actors and because his dialogue is lithe and sometimes quotable. ("Tradition is the illusion of permanence.") The film shows yet again that Allen knows how to flatter his audience: Harry is a sexually busy, glib atheist, exploitative of women, whose continual patronage of hookers is clearly his ideal in man-woman relationships, which is why his marriages failed. Apparently audiences, American and otherwise, male and female, either identify with this character or are amused by his witty cynicism in a medium not especially noted for either quality.

Cinematic note: Allen and his editor, Susan E. Morse, use small jump cuts all through this picture, but they can't be called Godardian. They don't mirror any serious moral anarchism in the film itself. They're just décor.

Dark Habits, Pedro Almodóvar, 1983 (*The New Republic*, 6 June 1988)

Pedro Almodóvar both writes and directs his films, and if his writing ever catches up with his directing, he'll be a filmmaker of some significance. He has the awe-cum-hatred of religion, the bitter comedy of a man horrified by society, the sadistic sensuality that marked Buñuel—and other Spaniards. In any one scene Almodóvar deploys those qualities incisively as a director. But the blueprint of the entire structure is blurry.

One reason for hope is that his fourth film, *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), which was his first to be shown in the United States (in 1985), raked a Madrid housewife over the coals of urban life with a fairly firm satirical grip. But now another of his films has been released here, and it plops into that sad, damp bag: it Shows Talent.

Dark Habits, his third film, was made too soon after Almodóvar got the idea, without enough self-questioning. A nightclub *chanteuse* is visited in her seedy

dressing room by some nuns who want her autograph. Soon after, when her boyfriend dies of an overdose, the frightened singer flees for refuge to the convent of those nuns and finds some surprises.

Wholly devout, these nuns express their devotion through truly dark habits. One of them writes soft-porn novels under a pen name; several of them do drugs; all of them have strange religious names. Sister Manure, Sister Snake, Sister Sin, and so on. Possibly they behave in this manner in order to bring themselves closer to their favorite guests, women in sleazy sorts of trouble. So the singer is quite welcome in this convent where the Madonna is dressed in chic robes according to the season of the year, and where the convent's priest smokes during mass.

As items in a comic dialogue, all these matters are well drawn. But in terms of forward motion, the script has troubles. First, it's a one-joke affair. Once the idea of reversals in the convent is established, we get only more and more of the same joke. Even less helpfully, the film starts as the story of the singer, then focuses on the sisters, then stays with them as, eventually, the singer returns to the world. It's as if the scenery took over from the protagonist.

***What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, Pedro Almodóvar, 1984 (*The New Republic*, 20 May 1985)**

What Have I Done to Deserve This?, a Spanish film, is like a skillful team of comic acrobats, tumbling away furiously, defying laws of gravity—both kinds. Yet, for all its skill, I didn't laugh once; and gradually, through the film, I found out why. Pedro Almodóvar, who wrote and directed, is wickedly inventive, morally anarchic, but not quite enough. Centrally and finally, he falters.

The picture begins with shots of kendo combat, in full Japanese rig, interrupted by the credits in cartoon lettering. The kendo academy is in Madrid. Soon we see one of the kendo combatants, now naked, step into the shower. A cleaning woman, in her thirties, watches. He beckons her into the shower, and she joins him for passionate (though quite visibly impossible) sex. It's this woman, played by Carmen Maura, who is the center of the film. We go home with her, meet her family, neighbors, and, subsequently, other employers. (Household chores included, she puts in an eighteen-hour day.)

Her family includes: a vain taxi-driver husband who bosses her mercilessly while he reminisces about an affair he once had in Germany with a woman for whom he forged some Hitler letters; Maura's mother-in-law, who locks up her bottles of mineral water and sells them to the rest of the family; Maura's teenaged son who pushes dope, and her younger teenaged son, who (she knows) is available to older men. Her neighbors include a congenial prostitute whom we first see when she comes in to borrow a whip, and an abrasive woman who hates her angelic-looking daughter of ten or so—a child who avenges herself with secret telekinetic powers. Maura's other employers include a kleptomaniac woman who steals her watch when she takes it off to work.

As is proper in farce, especially improper farce, each of the characters pursues his or her ego trail with fierce concentration on personal goals. The trails slide through and around one another with the surprise that comes from consistency, the consistency of blinkered vision. Almodóvar's actors, with one important exception, are perfectly cast—from Maura's mother-in-law, whose eyes

never actually can be seen behind her gleaming specs, to the angelic little girl who can peel off wallpaper by willing it. Almodóvar has been making films for ten years, has done a number of wild shorts and three wild previous features, and now can work with frightening accuracy, like a chef in a Japanese steak house slicing beef and vegetables so swiftly that you expect to see his fingers on the grill. So much that Almodóvar does is so dexterously naughty that I kept asking myself: Why don't I laugh?

The last sequence clarified the answer. In the course of the film we have seen Maura volunteer as a *voyeuse* when her whore friend needs a spectator to please an exhibitionist client; have seen her give her younger son for "adoption" to a flagrantly homosexual dentist so that she won't have to support the boy; have seen her murder her husband and get away with it because it looks like an accident. But we have also seen Maura (who has a marked resemblance to Irene Papas) as a loving mother and daughter-in-law and an understandably responsive woman. All the other characters are kept strictly within their eccentric solipsisms; she is an earth mother, the support of her family and world, and these qualities just don't fit with her amoral actions, which she seems almost to borrow from the others around her. Moreover, the actress herself, at least as she is directed here, is so womanly and warm that she seems a different breed of being from the others. Consciously or not, we keep asking what she's doing in this film.

This contrast is rammed home at the end when, her mother-in-law and older son having gone back to Ma's native village, Maura is left alone in the tiny family flat. She has a scene of quiet desolation, a suggestion of suicidal intent, until her younger son returns from his dentist-protector. Mother and boy embrace tearfully. The whole sequence jars, by Almodóvar's own criteria, and retrospectively it explains why the entire film, for all its black sparkle, isn't funny. Let me explain by analogy.

The dramatist Joe Orton doesn't have a heart. Almodóvar, whose film has a tone very much like Orton's plays, lacks the Englishman's full measure of amorality. Almodóvar plunges into moral anarchy with a lifeline of "heart" around his waist. And he worsens matters by his final shots, immense checkerboard façades of the apartment house in which Maura lives and of similar characterless beehives. It's more moral apologia that fails At the last, after sharp-toothed disregard for convention, Almodóvar tries to *explain* his characters' amorality with a few dabs of glib urban sociology: they are the way they are because of faceless modern life. Nonsense, both as sociology and as art. If Almodóvar wants to take on the risks of an Orton—whose work he knows, I'd guess—he needs to take on *all* the risks, without mealymouthed apologies.

***Matador*, Pedro Almodóvar, 1986 (*The New Republic*, 6 June 1988)**

Matador, Almodóvar's fifth feature, is even more disorderly than, say, *Dark Habits* (1983). It's a tale of love, sex, and death, which centers—when it finally does center—on the last coupling of a hypersensual murderess and a former matador. During this coupling, which they both know will be their last, she kills him and then herself. The themes leading up to that climax, treated fiercely, might have made a good film. The linkage of sex and death is familiar in both psychology and art, but it takes some concentration to make it emblematic rather than psychotic.

Almodóvar's screenplay is schizoid. Captured by this gruesome subject, he still can't suppress his instinct for sharp comedy based on reversals. For instance, at the dinner table in a luxurious home, grace is said by the mother of the house, who offers thanks, not for daily bread but for chicken soup, sole *meunière*, and (after prompting by the maid) flan.

Again, it's all well done. Again, any one sequence, seen in isolation, would show the hand of a filmmaker with control and personality. But, assembled, *Matador* is a series of tugs and counter-tugs that leaves us muddled and remote.

Kika, Pedro Almodóvar, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 6 June 1994)

The history of the twentieth-century assault on Good Taste will surely be written one day, and surely Pedro Almodóvar will figure in it. That history will be analogous to another cultural campaign, the move to blur distinctions between high art and popular art. (Terms that the blurrers use.) Almodóvar, sizzlingly talented, makes films that are polished and gleaming but are, basically, something like soft-core porno comic strips. His chief motive is his belief that Mrs. Grundy is a hypocritical dolt and deserves to have her skirts blown up around her head. His films mock smug conventions, and they do it with sophisticated razzberries.

Often in his still-brief career he has been like a marauding shark, ripping social order and making us smile while he does it. Now he marauds further and wants us to keep smiling. In *Kika*, which is set in Madrid, a leading character is a handsome satyriast who is below mental par. His sister, a housemaid, tells us that, to keep him from violating the whole neighborhood, she occasionally gives him sex to cool him down. This brother, hiding in the apartment where she works because the police are after him, finds the mistress of the house asleep in her slip, inserts orange sections in her vagina, then sniffs and eats them; then, armed, he rapes her. This wakes her—and she objects, though not in terror. While the rape is going on—and on (he is indefatigable)—his sister and others come into the bedroom and ask him to desist, but he continues, while the victim protests and the sister pleads. At last he withdraws, goes out onto the terrace, and masturbates. A woman in the street below looks up and gets a drop of semen on her cheek.

I don't think I distort by isolating these matters, as long as I emphasize that a spirit of burlesque pervades the film. (Burlesque rape? Yes, says Almodóvar.) The gaudy décor and the revue-sketch acting support this mood. But *Kika* on the whole shows a weakness in Almodóvar. Often he is irreverent about stupidities in society, but sometimes he is merely irreverent. It's as though he means us to say, "If we want his brilliant excesses, we just have to accept his worrisome ones."

Kika, the lady of the house, played with tired drive by Veronica Forque, is hardly a prude; she lives with a lingerie photographer and occasionally beds her lover's stepfather, who lives upstairs. That stepfather is played by Peter Coyote, who studded his way through *Outrageous Fortune* (1987) with Bette Midler and talked dirty all through Polanski's *Bitter Moon* (1992). Here he continues on his glandular way, dubbed (I suppose) in Spanish. The housemaid is an Almodóvar familiar, the woman who looks like a Picasso model, Rossy de Palma. Her phallocrat brother is Santiago Lajusticia. Victoria Abril, another Almodóvar pet, plays the host of a TV program called "Today's Worst," which features daily disasters. She wears a spaceship costume, bust-enhancing, with a camcorder on top of her helmet. It's a better role than her American début in *Jimmy Hollywood*

(1994), but it doesn't make the most of this spirited comedienne.

I haven't attempted to sketch much of the story. Let's just say that it glides along from blast to attempted blast and that sometimes it strains. I hope this strain doesn't mean that Almodóvar is running dry, that he doesn't still have a lot of first-class stingers to jab us with.

***One Wild Moment*, Claude Berri, 1977 (*The New Republic*, 14 March 1981)**

Walter Huston once did a play about it (*Apple of His Eye*, 1946) and sang about it ("September Song" in *Knickerbocker Holiday*, 1938). Edward G. Robinson also did a play about it (*Middle of the Night*, 1956) and Fredric March later filmed it. What is "it"? Love between a middle-aged man and a girl. Here it is again, treated with sympathy and candor, in a French film called *One Wild Moment*. The source is unlikely: Claude Berri, who wrote and directed it, previously committed such minor crimes as *The Two of Us* (1967) and *The Sex Shop* (1972), treacle and suburban tease respectively. Now, for whatever mysterious reason, Berri is at least temporarily more interested in truth than commercial consequences and, helped by a good cast, has made a good small film. Small, as a plastic bomb may be small.

Berri has complicated the basic situation by making the girl, who is not quite eighteen, the daughter of the forty-four-year-old man's best friend. This not only gives the pain an extra twist, it opens up more of the subterranean tremors. The two men have gone off for a seaside holiday in a rented villa with their two daughters, who are of an age and close friends. One man is Victor Lanoux, of *Cousin, Cousine* (1975), who has quarreled with his wife: she has gone to Morocco and may join them later. The other man is Jean-Pierre Marielle, the ultra-proud aristocrat of *Let Joy Reign Supreme* (1975), who is divorced. Marielle's daughter, Christine Dejoux, gives him trouble because she insists on living as she pleases; any requests from him, like getting home at a reasonable hour of the night, have the predictable effect. The angry case that Dejoux makes for being let alone may be neither logical nor mature, but it strikes familiar anguishes. Marielle's troubles with Lanoux's daughter, Agnès Soral, are especially poignant because they are reflections of his concerns about his own daughter.

The holiday begins usually enough. Too usually, in fact: the litany of radio commercials in the car as the four drive southward toward the sea made me think that Berri's persistent sea is platitude. But even before the knots of complication, the film becomes watchable because the four are amusingly realistic and well acted. In simplest terms, they are recognizable fellow creatures. (Recognizable even though topless bathing of daughters with fathers and others is not exactly Jones Beach.) Then one night Marielle drifts into a wedding on the beach of two of Soral's friends. A good time is being had by all, and soon by Marielle. Then there's some moonlight bathing, with the girls naked, the men in their briefs (the last prudishness is male nudity). And we sense what's going to happen. When Marielle and Soral come out on an isolated part of the beach, dripping wet and breathing hard and feeling good, and look at each other, it happens. (One nasty practical note: wet bodies on the sand with no blanket? Er . . . really???)

It would have been bad enough if it were just what the title says, one wild moment. But Marielle has really started things: the girl tells him that she adores

him, has adored him for years. They meet again, and—what's both horrible and reassuring—his own daughter tells him that she knows and understands. (Though it further weakens his hold on *her*, of course.) What's worse, Soral tells her father, Lanoux, that she has made love for the first time: she had always promised to tell him, though she had said it would be beforehand. (She won't identify the man.) Lanoux takes this difference as cause for anger—he clearly wants such a cause in order to discard his lofty modern permissiveness—and rampages around the resort town suspecting men, at last assaulting one man. Marielle witnesses some of this and confesses. Lanoux is stunned. In a way Marielle is the more shaken: by the fact that it is his friend's daughter of his own daughter's age; by the fact that she loves him so warmly, so truthfully; by the fact that he is responding with much more than the wild-moment feeling. The picture ends—a cliché to match the opener—with a freeze-frame of Marielle and Soral. They are apparently going to have a try at being serious about their feelings for each other. Perhaps even marriage.

A lot of live nerves are naturally and disturbingly entangled here, most of them bound to the complications of father-daughter relationships. Lanoux's rage when he learns that his daughter is now a non-virgin has the usual (unspoken) source: if society forbids me to be my daughter's lover, how dare anyone else be? And of course Marielle, by loving Soral, is vicariously sleeping with his own daughter. All this is true without being in the least sordid, any more than the fact that many men marry women who, consciously or not, remind them of their mothers. And Dejoux's acceptance of her father's affair with her friend is, irritatingly to him, her tacit knowledge that her friend is a kind of proxy for herself. But *that's* not all: the feeling between Marielle and Soral is in itself affecting, Freudian linkages or not. And that feeling has built into it the time-pathos of all age-distanced relationships: because we aren't the same age, we can't possibly have our whole lives together, but if we were the same age, we might not feel the way we do, might not even have been attracted to each other.

Very little of this is said, a great deal of it is touchingly implicit. Lanoux presumably will recover—somewhat, anyway—if Marielle marries his daughter because then at least he can't feel that his friend trifled with his daughter. Marielle will take a hazing from some parts of society, but, if the marriage works—for a time, anyway—that will pass, and he'll probably gain more respect, even authority, with his own daughter. The marriage might well last a good long time: I foresee children. Within the framework of the film, however, the real "winners" are the two daughters. They have exposed the flimsiness of some conventions, to their fathers' embarrassment; one of them is wedded to a vicarious father and the other one knows it. It might all work out quite well.

If the film leads to fantasies about what might happen after the final freeze, that is another way of proving that Berri tapped something deep. I'd want to wait a bit before believing that Berri has come into any kind of enlarged artistic stature: lots of minor people in every art make occasional good works. But that's no reason to undervalue the good work he has done. A modest film with large and lasting echoes.

***Tchao Pantin*, Claude Berri, 1983 (*The New Republic*, 11 March 1985)**

Lambert, a pudgy, middle-aged quasi-alcoholic, works the night shift at a filling station in a shabby district of Paris. He is taciturn, impassive. Bensoussan, a young half-Arab/half-Jew, around twenty, stops in one night for a moped spark plug (really to duck the police, who are rolling by in a patrol car). Nothing much happens between Lambert and Bensoussan. But the visits recur because, we feel, both are secretly lonely.

In the early part of the story we spend more time with the youth than with the older man, and we soon learn that Bensoussan, who has said he is a bartender, is really a drug pusher for an Arab café owner. He confesses this to Lambert one night as they sit together in the filling station. Lambert merely shrugs and says the youth will be dead soon. By this time, however, we know that the two men are grudgingly fond of each other. When Lambert is too soused to pump gas, Bensoussan helps out. When the youth gets beaten up by some other dealers, Lambert finds his rat-hole room and cleans him up.

It's from a novel called *Tchao Pantin* and keeps the title, which translates roughly as *So Long, Stooge*. The novel is by Alain Page, but it sounds like Simenon. When the youth has a three-hour affair with a punk girl, and later describes it to Lambert, the Simenon quality increases; it increases further when the girl, who has entered the story obliquely, becomes involved with Lambert after Bensoussan is killed. (No surprise. It was bound to come, as Lambert predicted.) And the focus of the narrative is pure Simenon, the intense inquiry into grubby lives being lived in cramped attitudes, an inquiry that discloses pathos, drama, even magnitude.

The director, Claude Berri, who wrote the screenplay with Page, understands all this. But the difference from Simenon, which makes this good film somewhat lesser than it might have been, is that Berri-Page explain too much. We know almost from the start what the youth's life is, that Lambert lives alone. We know by Lambert's very ignoring of Bensoussan's questions that he once had a wife and family. For the Simenon effect, that's all we need to know. But the script works out parallels between Lambert's past and the present that neaten up the film too much, that make its mysteries into coincidences and transform a slicing into life (rather than a slice of life) into a tidily balanced story. The relationship between the street boy and the sodden night-shift man, their wretched grasp for "family" in the small, lighted station amid gas pumps and dark buildings, was foundation enough. The action that follows the boy's death would therefore have been more moving if it had been less precisely justified.

Whether the balancing is in the novel I don't know. Berri's work has antecedents for bother the strengths and timidities of this film. He has been directing for twenty years and has made soppy pictures (*The Two of Us*, 1967) and at least one that was truthfully disturbing (*One Wild Moment*, 1977). The best of *Tchao Pantin*, most of it, is Berri's best; the weak bits rank with his weakest. Indeed, I could hardly believe my eyes when, just before the end, a black cat crossed Lambert's path.

But *Tchao Pantin* sneaks up on you. It promises little at the start, and, in a curious way, that small promise is inviting. No gripping situation is set up. All that happens is that two completely credible human beings move into view—and into view of each other. Because of the director's cool, ungrubby hand at the beginning, the film wins our confidence. This confidence is never quite betrayed: the essence of those two people remains, and the girl's is added. The picture thus never goes flat: it just becomes too much of a movie.

Most of the good quality comes from Berri's actors. Lambert is played by a man called simply Coluche (Michel Gérard Joseph Colucci), who has a reputation in France as a comedian. He is temperamentally a cross between Jack Warden and Walter Matthau, though he doesn't look like either. I had seen Coluche only once before, dismal in a dismal comedy called *My Best Friend's Girl* (1983). But *Tchao Pantin* has nothing to do with comedy: Coluche goes to the core of a dour man, convincing us of the man's tacit reasons for dourness. Lambert is a silent, dark pool on one side of the rushing city currents.

Richard Anconina, scrawny and beak-nosed, creates a Bensoussan completely concentrated on the small objectives and defiances of his life, yet vulnerable to generosity. Anconina doesn't trade on recognizable street mannerisms; his Bensoussan is an individual who lives in the street world. And Lola, the punk girl played by Agnès Soral, progresses touchingly from a role that she had adopted to the Lola who had adopted the role.

The cinematography is by Bruno Nuytten, who worked in the United States once. (He did *Brubaker* [1980] with Robert Redford.) At first, despite the virtuosity of the opening rain sequence, I thought the film looked a bit viscous; but as it went along, the rather thick colors emphasized the neon-soaked feeling of these night lives. The art director is Alexandre Trauner, born in 1906, who has been working in film since 1932—to name just one of his many achievements, *Children of Paradise* (1945)—and is an acknowledged master in his field. I don't contend that the settings here are immediately recognizable as a master's work, but they certainly are vivid.

***Uranus*, Claude Berri, 1990 (*The New Republic*, 9 September 1991)**

The French director Claude Berri has had a peculiar career. What's peculiar is that there are some genuinely good items in it. The man who began with such treacle as *Le Poulet* (*The Chicken*, 1962) and *The Two of Us* (1967) and *The Sex Shop* (1972) seemed destined for a successful confectionery life. But *Tchao Pantin* (1983) wasn't bad, and the duo of *Jean de Florette* (1986) and *Manon of the Spring* (1986) was solid—full-blooded, old-fashioned films that might easily have slipped into the Berri molasses barrel but which were kept firm.

However, as Heraclitus said, character is fate. With *Uranus* Berri had the chance to make the film of his life; instead, lapsing into earlier extravagance, he hasn't done much more than show us what the film might have been. The subject is postwar France, the place a bombed-out town in the spring of 1945. The screenplay was adapted by Berri and his sister, Arlette Langmann, from a 1948 novel by Marcel Aymé (unread by me), a man whose own behavior under the Occupation was not above suspicion and who here treats that very theme: behavior under the Occupation and its after-effects. Needless to say, it's a complex topic. What it certainly doesn't need is "dramatizing" in the most facile sense. From what I know of Aymé's work, I doubt that it's so treated by him in his novel. The heaviness here shows the vulgar Berri touch of old.

Contrasting kinds of behavior collide in the film: those who resisted the Germans (mostly Communists); those who collaborated out of genuine conviction that fascism was France's salvation; those who collaborated because they didn't care much one way or another and wanted to keep out of trouble. One grim fact the film faces is that, now that the Germans are gone and the French fascists

overthrown, the triumphant Communists are behaving much like fascists—controlling jobs, plotting, indicting out of vindictiveness rather than proof. This grimness is underscored by the one fugitive in the film, certain to be shot if found, a still-convinced French fascist. The film's best element is that Berri sees the irony in this reversal of the wartime situation when anti-fascists were in hiding; and he adds to the irony by using an actor, Gérard Desarthe, who gives the role dignity, conviction, quiet fatalism. (It seems pertinent to note that Berri is Jewish.)

One of the now powerful Communists, played by Michel Blanc, is something of a counterpart, quiet and honest. One of the apoliticals, Jean-Pierre Marielle, is bland and shrugging; another, Philippe Noiret, is ruefully philosophical, enjoying the spectacle of life as it plays out around him. (This is said to have been Aymé's view.) No woman in the film—there are several prominent ones—is given political color of any kind.

The film goes chiefly awry in the way Berri writes the neighborhood café owner and the way he is acted by the prodigiously gifted Gérard Depardieu. The *patron* is shown as a sensual brute who loves poetry and tries to improvise it and as the enemy of one particular Communist fink whom he persecutes throughout the story. (The *patron* wears a faint Hitler mustache.) Depardieu spends about three-quarters of his screen time bullying his enemy or roaring with *élan vital*. He has mountainous presence, but Berri exploits it so shamelessly that he tears the film apart. And there's a protracted death scene for Depardieu that reminded me of Nick Bottom from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

But Berri also encourages or allows three older actors to overstep: Marielle, Noiret, and Michel Galabru, who was wondrous as the madman in *The Judge and the Assassin* (1976) and is here a wartime profiteer. Each of these men has at least one long speech in which he explains himself to his own satisfaction. Marielle is a shrewd opportunist who talks cynically: money is the only real value, he says. (Yet he behaves humanely: he shelters the fugitive fascist at some personal risk.) Galabru exemplifies *je m'en foutisme*. He tells his son, in their comfy home, that one of the reasons he did what he did during the war was his self-disgust at bringing into the world a son so much like himself.

Noiret, a schoolteacher who boards in Marielle's apartment, wends his way from soup in his room to the corner of Depardieu's café, which is his temporary schoolroom until the school is rebuilt. His house was bombed during the war, just as he was reading about Uranus in an astronomy series: hence the title's implication that the town, through that bombing, became another planet. (His wife was killed that night because she was with her lover, whose house was flattened.) Now, almost resignedly, he gets pleasure out of the sights and sounds of the day.

Under Berri's weak hand, each of these fine artists goes a bit overboard. For a while, we can tell ourselves that these actors, with their excellent voices and love of their language, are taking realism into hyperrealism by concentrating on their own art, making the film an occasion for truth in performance rather than truth in text. But soon it's clear that this is the wrong vehicle for such aesthetic adventure. Their performances simply are a bit fruity. Add Depardieu's rolling around in self-display, and *Uranus* becomes a serious picture, about the mobility of morality, seriously botched.

***Luna*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1979 (*The New Republic*, 20 October 1979)**

The line of Bernardo Bertolucci's career is beginning to look as wretched as Robert Altman's. Bertolucci, too, began with something more than promise (*Before the Revolution* in 1964, even *Partner* four years later in 1968). Very soon he began to swamp that promise with self-intoxicating dexterity and egocentric artiness, which is the only kind of artiness actually (*The Spider's Stratagem* and *The Conformist*, both from 1970). Then, like Altman, he peaked with a film that was more bulk than weight. (*Last Tango in Paris* [1972] can now be seen as Bertolucci's *Nashville* [1975].) Not surprisingly, the same critical pumping stations that later inflated Altman also blew Bertolucci. Then, inevitably, came the shrinking into mannerism and derivation (*1900*, from 1976), while the laurelers were left holding their oversized laurels. Now comes *Luna*, a picture so ludicrously bad that one is almost tempted to pity Bertolucci. But no, he is a monstrous and disgusting artist, not a failed authentic one, and for the sake of the authentic ones, successful or failed, Bertolucci has to be seen as what he is: a clever, cheap exploiter of everything that comes to his hand, including the talent he began with (like Altman).

I can't even grant that he started *Luna* with a serious idea, even with a serious ambition toward moods and textures for which he had to find an idea. From its first moment, *Luna* feels like self-indulgence, lazy preening while lying on the audience's lap. The very first shots, intense close-ups of a curly-headed infant dropping honey that his mother puts on her finger for him to lick, seem exhibitionistic rather than direct. (And, oh, is this ever a weightily symbolic scene, with the child tagging along a thread of yarn as he toddles—umbilical cord, perhaps?—and is there ever a reprise near the end.) The full moon appears in this first sequence (the title is Italian for moon), rather hurriedly jammed in after a long daylight scene; more shots of the moon are jammed in later as symbols of femininity and flow. When the film isn't being portentously symbolic, it's being empty—one or the other. The emptiness of the way many beautiful locations are used soon becomes exploitation.

Vittorio Storaro, whose lush cinematography was so ironically apt in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), is once again—with Bertolucci—merely fulsome. And with the movement of the camera, too, Bertolucci turns emptiness into offense. The camera rarely stops moving—pans and zooms and withdrawals—but these movements are so devoid of dramatic or even sheerly kinetic force that they become cartoons of the whole aesthetics of camera movement. One exploitation of place that I found especially galling—I admit this is personal—is a scene at the front gate of Verdi's villa at Sant' Agata (which Bertolucci treats as if it were a suburb of Rome instead of being far up past Parma). The scene there between Jill Clayburgh and her son affected me the way a Busby Berkeley number at Lourdes might affect a Catholic.

What does this big iridescent tumor of a film pretend to be? Underneath the two hours of pomposity is a story that, essentially, is quite old-fashioned, for all its blatantly daring detail. An American opera singer has a fifteen-year-old son whom she loves but neglects because of her career. His putative father dies. She takes the boy to Rome, where she is singing and where she learns that he is on dope. After the story goes through a lot of stuff—just stuff—the boy learns that the recently deceased father was not his real father: the latter is an Italian still

living nearby and teaching small children. (Bertolucci leans on sentimental attribution—teacher equals simple goodness—as cornily as D. W. Griffith.) Apparently the boy's disturbance has come from some vague intimation that he has never known his real father (pure Victorian mysticism). He seeks out Dad and reunites him with Mom (more Victoriana) at an outdoor opera rehearsal.

The theme apparently—not so apparently, in fact—is that the boy has to be surrogate for his father until his father appears, surrogate in both his own life and his mother's. He and Mom are very close. At one point she masturbates him in his moment of need (a mother's work is never done); at another, they come very close to incest, a scene that ends with his head resting on the crotch of her panties. The publicity tells us that originally Bertolucci wanted mother and son to Do It but decided that it would end the picture right there, nothing could follow it. Wrong. He could have finished with a trio, non-operatic: mother, son, and long-lost father. Well, maybe next time. And maybe next time, some glimmer of conviction, of internal imperative for the goings-on. I don't care much for Louis Malle's film about incest, *Murmur of the Heart* (1971), but at least it had an inner rationale.

It's remotely conceivable that a really rich performance of the opera singer and a movingly anguished performance of the son might have given some texture to this nauseating fraud. But Clayburgh, who sometimes looks like a beagle, is skimpy as the singer. Many opera singers sound vernacular and tinny when they speak, as she does, but on the stage they don't "act" vernacular and tinny as she does, and they usually have some on-stage manner off-stage. The role desperately needed more than the one-and-a-half or two dimensions that Clayburgh can give it. As the son, Matthew Barry is not a discovery.

The screenplay, rendered into English by George Malko, was written by Bertolucci, his brother Giuseppe, and Clare Peploe. She is a young Englishwoman whose conjunction with Michelangelo Antonioni's life marks its artistic downturn. His career, even in its decline, has no resemblance to Bertolucci's. Still, Peploe appears in Antonioni's work as assistant on *Zabriskie Point* (1970); her brother, Mark, was the original author of *The Passenger* (1975) and presumably she wasn't far away. She joined Bertolucci on *1900*, and here she is again. In the old days, lepers had to wear bells. Nowadays artistic lepers get job after job.

The soundtrack of *Luna* is egregiously bad, full of those long dead silences that are interludes, not of quiet in a room, but of dead non-sound in a recording studio while everyone is waiting for the next cue. And a further desecration is the way that Bertolucci has used fragments of Verdi in the film. Obviously influenced by Visconti's integration of opera into film, Bertolucci has been mimicking it since *Before the Revolution*. There it was not mere pillage to support a weak structure. Here it is worse than plunder of Verdi—it is also mockery of Visconti. In the wonderful opening of *Senso* (1954),Visconti uses a scene in *Il Trovatore* along with a sense of the backstage atmosphere of the opera house as the generative metaphor of his film. Bertolucci also uses a scene from *Il Trovatore*, also takes us backstage, but it is all sheer aural and visual décor, to no point in the picture.

***The Last Emperor*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 14 December 1987)**

Marx and Freud have dominated Bernardo Bertolucci's career, for better and worse. Better: *Before the Revolution* (1964) and *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man*

(1981). Worse: *1900* (1976) and *Luna* (1979). The twin deities apparently persuaded Bertolucci to choose his latest subject. The story of the Chinese emperor Pu Yi could hardly have swept Bertolucci off his feet as a drama. It's not a drama at all—Pu Yi was a victim, nothing more. But presumably the director saw a Freudian catalyst in the beginning of *The Last Emperor* and saw one face of Marxism in its conclusion, and these may have fixed him on the subject.

If the term "pathetic" can be applied to any emperor in world history, Pu Yi is the man. In 1908, at the age of three, he was taken from his high-born mother (who later killed herself) by his grandmother, the Dowager Empress, and brought to live in the Forbidden City, the huge imperial residence in Peking (as it then was). Within a few days the males between him and the throne died, and the child was named emperor. In 1912 a republic was declared, and the seven-year-old emperor abdicated. The child, now even more of a nominal ruler, wandered like a prisoner at large within the Forbidden City.

Marriage and concubines came along in time, as did expulsion from the palace and eventual residence in Manchuria, Pu Yi's place of origin. In 1931 the Japanese invaded Manchuria and established the empire of Manchukuo with Pu Yi as their puppet emperor—a front through whom they could rule. Pu Yi tried to establish parity with the Japanese and got into trouble. After the Second World War, he and his wife wanted to flee to Japan but were intercepted by Soviet paratroopers and were turned over to the Chinese revolutionaries. Pu Yi then served ten years in a Chinese political prison at hard labor. When he was released, he worked as a gardener until his death in 1967.

The Freudian touches are of course the insecurities brought about by separation from his mother and by his loneliness as a child. We are even treated to some glimpses of his toilet training. His imprisonment at the end, during which he was not physically ill-treated, was seen by his Communist jailers as re-education so that, in time, he could take a useful place in society.

The sole personally initiated action in this long chronicle is his puny, quickly squelched rebellion against the Japanese. Everything else is reaction. Pu Yi's story isn't even poignant. Who can be moved by his story, who can think it sad? Edmond Rostand found some smidgen of poignancy in *L'Aiglon*, the story of Napoleon's son, who spent his short life trying to regain his father's throne, but even that story is now of diminished interest. Pu Yi is simply an eccentricity of history, worth a paragraph in *Reader's Digest,* not a nearly three-hour film.

Apparently Bertolucci made it chiefly because he was empowered to make it. We're told that he approached the Chinese government with two projects to be done in China, Malraux's *Man's Fate* (once planned by Fred Zinnemann) and this story. The Chinese would not sanction the Malraux, so Bertolucci went ahead with this film rather than waste the chance to shoot in China. The questionable motive led to questionable filmmaking. *The Last Emperor* is slightly sophisticated DeMille, laden with sumptuous costumes and tours of the Forbidden City and mobs of people. Bertolucci had the use of extras on a scale far beyond the budget limits of Western filmmaking; it's a long time since I've seen such crowds on the screen, so many long lines of uniformed guards standing at attention. The Forbidden City is a prime travelogue subject, but neither the panoramas nor the choreographed crowds constitute a film.

The screenplay by the director and Mark Peploe tries to liven things up by cutting back and forth in time. The film begins in the Red Chinese prison, then goes

to the three-year-old child and to other time planes, returning to the prison after flashbacks until it reaches "the present" and moves forward from the prison to the finish. This flitting doesn't help. When the puppet emperor's tennis game is interrupted by armed guards, there's no terror; when, in a dinner jacket, he sings "Am I Blue?" at a lavish party, there's no humor; when, at the last, the bent old gardener buys a tourist's ticket of admission to his former palace, there's no pang. Even the very last bit, a guide taking American tourists through the throne room, is muffed, a toothless bite.

John Lone, the Chinese-American actor who was strange and forceful in Schepisi's *Iceman* (1984), behaves credibly as (the adult) Pu Yi but has little chance to do anything other than behave credibly. Most of the roles are played by English-speaking Chinese actors, some of whom are effective. The only recognizable actor is Peter O'Toole as the emperor's British tutor. O'Toole, looking much more than twenty years older than he looked in 1967, tries to give the role flavor by over-articulating—enouncing "Scotland" as "Scot-land," for instance. Bertolucci, hot or cold, extravagant or focused, was always visible in his films. Here he is invisible, swamped by pedestrian procedure. A controversial director has reached bottom—he has made a consistently boring film.

***Stealing Beauty*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1996 (*The New Republic*, 24 June 1996)**

Bernardo Bertolucci's new film is a record of infatuations. *Stealing Beauty*—a meaningless title—tells us first of all that the middle-aged Bertolucci is infatuated with Liv Tyler, a young American actress. (I'm speaking only of what's visible on screen.) Such infatuation is hardly new, and sometimes it has produced exceptional work. But sometimes it's embarrassing, as it is here. Tyler has a good face for film, and Bertolucci muses on it at length: the eyes, cheeks, and mouth that are fine in themselves and together compose loveliness. Otherwise, Tyler is dull: a droning voice, commonplace talent, no electricity. Yet Bertolucci treats her as if she were, say, a new Audrey Hepburn and thus only makes her slightness slighter and his enslavement more patent.

Another infatuation, more understandable: Bertolucci loves Tuscany, where the film is set. He wants to use it, not only as background but as an aesthetic embrace of his characters. Tuscany is paradise, as someone says in the picture, but Bertolucci and his cinematographer, Darius Khondji, are so besotted with it that they have mostly rendered it in heavy postcard colors.

Still another infatuation: Bertolucci, after all these years, is still wonderstruck with decadence. "Decadent! How I love that early Victorian word!" says a character in Shaw's *Fanny's First Play*. Well, Bertolucci is less early Victorian than late neorealistic, as he reruns the symptoms of rotted European morality that oozed across the screen in the '60s and '70s. When Tyler goes to a large party in a large villa, we expect that, after enough wine and enough pot, we'll see the Ugly Facts about these seemingly beautiful people. And, unfortunately, Bertolucci does not disappoint.

Bertolucci's original story—a generous adjective—was made into a screenplay by the American novelist Susan Minot, who has an unwavering eye for the predictable and an ear for the tired phrase. (One lover to another: "I like it when you're mad.") The basic idea is that Tyler, now nineteen, has come to a

hilltop villa to have her portrait done by an Irish artist who lives there with his wife and a garland of guests. Tyler is also returning to this place because here she had her first kiss (not from the artist) and may now have her first sex. She will also try to discover the lover of her now-deceased mother who might have begotten her at this very villa.

Not unusable themes, but Bertolucci is so avid for "touches" that the story gets smothered with atmospheric baggage. One of the guests (Jeremy Irons) is terminally ill and is near the end; his function, on his way out, is to urge Tyler to live—by which he means to copulate. Also on the premises is a "legendary art dealer" (Jean Marais, Cocteau's erstwhile ideal now in his eighties) intended, I suppose, to give perspective to the century. He is mere ambulatory décor, as is a journalist who writes advice to the lovelorn (Stefania Sandrelli, once one of the stunners in Bertolucci's *The Conformist* [1970]). And there's an American lawyer and his English girlfriend, who provide samples of sexual intercourse when the director wants to dab it in. Various high-testosterone English and Italian young men are woven through for differing reasons, and there's an overnight visit by an Italian army lieutenant for no reason whatsoever.

Naturally there are big dinner tables in the kitchen and big luncheon tables under the Tuscan skies, and naturally what looks initially like a group of attractively tinted souls turns out to have different colors. The general atmosphere is supposed to be sexual, through which Tyler is moving toward defloration. Twice she accidentally witnesses couples grappling. Her near-seduction is accompanied by hootchy-kootchy "Oriental" music (and there's no reason to think that Bertolucci was being funny; he has no humor).

But long before the promised end, we sense that, interested though he may have been in Tyler's story, Bertolucci was chiefly concerned to employ his infatuations in what he thought would be a Chekhovian mode. Assemble a group of different people in a country house, each with a strand of history and a purpose, and the result is Chekhov, right? This was the delusion that hobbled the recent Russian film *Burnt by the Sun* (1994), and it does the same to *Stealing Beauty*.

Something else becomes clear about Bertolucci. When a career is so heavily laden with vacuous artiness, so full of inadequately examined choices, so emptily assumptive of superiority, a hard fact looms. Fundamentally, under the chi-chi, Bertolucci is stupid.

Sweetie, Jane Campion, 1989 (*The New Republic*, 26 February 1990)

Jane Campion is a newcomer, a New Zealander who works in Australia and is now loudly hailed in America. *Sweetie* is her first feature. She wrote it with Gerard Lee; but after the first five or six minutes, it's clear that her heart is not in the screenplay—it's in the pictures that she makes with her cinematographer, Sally Bongers.

Still, there *is* a screenplay—about a young Australian factory worker named Kay, who believes in omens and hauntings. Tea leaves, for instance. A medium tells her that a question mark will figure in her life. She then meets Lou, a young man whose hair curls in a question mark on his forehead. Immediately she seduces him away from his fiancée. Then Sweetie arrives at the house that Kay shares with Lou. Sweetie is Kay's adipose, highly disturbed sister who thinks she's

a pop singer and who brings along her drugged-out "producer." Sweetie immediately slovens up the house, in her neurotic way, and the parents can't help, because back in *their* house, Mom has just left Dad and has gone out west to become a cook on a ranch (as we'd call it).

A few questions. What did Lou's fiancée say or do to Kay after the latter stole her boyfriend? Why did Kay and Lou make love in an oil puddle on a garage floor? Why did Mom leave Dad? Why do Mom and Dad become reconciled? What do Kay and Lou and Dad think will happen, other than disaster, when they leave Sweetie alone in Kay's house and drive out west to see Mom?

Answers are not expected. The questions themselves are the answer—the fact that they, and others, exist. They only underscore that Campion is more keen about photo opportunities than about dramatic or narrative cogency. Her screenplay is to her what a libretto was to a lesser nineteenth-century opera composer: a series of pegs for visual arias.

Corners of rooms, low angles, high angles, shots past large objects in the foreground, heightened light or lowered light—all these get a good workout. When we go to a cemetery, the first shot is of a row of cypress trees, through which we manage to glimpse one grave. This shot, like so many others, is not meant to epitomize the moment but to draw our attention to Campion. And Bongers.

Campion has been compared to Jim Jarmusch. This seems absurd. Jarmusch's spare screenplays are carefully measured to the necessary minimum, like good minimal design of every kind. His camera operates in the same precise, equivalently minimal way. Campion wants to deal much more conventionally with her characters, with more psychological probing and emotional interaction than Jarmusch cares about. At the same time she wants to indulge her painterly eye. The result is a deadlock between these two elements, dramatic and pictorial.

If Campion can accept that we now know about her eye and can concentrate on an integrated story, she might make a good traditional filmmaker. If that road doesn't interest her, she could diminish the emotional turbulence in her scripts so that it doesn't clamor for attention, and become something like a (minor) cinematic Robert Wilson. But whatever she does later, *Sweetie* is only a workshop along the way.

An Angel at My Table, Jane Campion, 1990 (*The New Republic*, 3 June 1991)

Last year, reviewing Jane Campion's *Sweetie* (1989), I said, "If Campion can accept that we now know about her [pictorial] eye and can concentrate on an integrated story, she might make a good traditional filmmaker." She hadn't waited for my advice: she was already almost finished with *An Angel at My Table*, which is traditional in approach, which employs her eye to present a narrative, and which is good.

An Angel at My Table is a two-and-a-half-hour distillation, by the screenwriter Laura Jones, of Janet Frame's three volumes of autobiography. (The books, published from 1982 to 1984, are now available in one paperbound volume from George Braziller.) The film calls itself a trilogy, with one section devoted to each volume. For those who haven't read the books, the story may be surprising. We know that Frame is an eminent writer, and we know that she will move from ordinary beginnings to recognition and success. But we are not prepared for much of the dark texture that intervenes or for the odd, almost cheery tone in which

even the worst moments are couched.

Frame (b. 1924) is one of the five children of a New Zealand railway worker and his hearty wife. Her childhood included the usual momentous initiations into the world but also into a world beyond the visible and tangible, disclosed to her by imagination. Early on, she discovered that she liked to write and that she was shy. This shyness apparently had something to do with the fact that she was chunkily built, had a large mop of frizzy red hair, and had curious teeth.

When she was quite young, a sister drowned. (Ten years later, another sister drowned.) As a young teacher, she became stressed and depressed and made a feeble (aspirin) attempt at suicide. She was taken to a mental hospital, falsely diagnosed as schizophrenic, and was given electric shock therapy. In and out of hospitals, she was given 200 shock treatments in the next eight years—during which she also published a book of stories and won a prize.

With a travel grant, she went to London. She soon fell into a consciously arty set, who were somewhat nettled to find that this provincial had already published a book and had another forthcoming. She then went to Ibiza (along the way, her teeth were fixed), continued to write fiction and poetry, had her first sexual experience, returned to London—where the diagnosis of schizophrenia was ruled false—then went home to New Zealand, where she lives and writes. (To date, eleven novels, four story collections, a volume of poetry, and a children's book.)

The first part of the film is the fullest because childhood, though hardly simple, is simpler than what comes after. In the second and third parts, even those who don't know the books may sense synoptic touches. But Jones's screenplay, as treated by Campion, does the essential: it captures the straightforward, fresh tone. For Frame's autobiography is suffused with appetite, with openness, even when she is beset by peculiar people, peculiar diagnoses, peculiar emotions. She is like an especially patient Candide, forging ahead with mixed purpose and acceptance, with ego (who could be a writer without ego?) but with wonder. The film understands all this.

Campion's prime and perfect move was in the casting of the three Janets: the child, Alexia Keogh, the adolescent, Karen Fergusson, and the young woman, Kerry Fox. Each of them has a third of the picture. That Campion was able to find three people with physical resemblances to one another and to Frame was possibly only good luck, though makeup and costuming doubtless helped. But, more important, what Campion achieved with her three Janets was a continuity of presence and person, of temperament: a manner of walking, of posture, of gesture, and, fundamentally, a continuity of inner self. The woman who has her first sexual experience in Ibiza is related to the child who, at the family dinner table, innocently uses a naughty word that a school chum taught her.

Everyone else in the cast helps substantially. The casting and behavior of the child's schoolteachers evoke time and place. K. J. Wilson is her sturdy father; Iris Churn is an Erda-like mother. David Letch dabs in a vivid sketch of Janet's Irish landlord in London, who is smitten with her. William Brandt is amusingly serious as her American lover in Ibiza. The score by Don McGlashan has a nice folk feeling, varied with a few uses of Schubert's "An die Musik," which enraptured Janet at first hearing.

Campion's previous film was burdened with precious camera work—high angles, low angles, weird vantage points. Not one bit of that is evident here. She

was so concerned with her subject that she forgot about self-display and put her (considerable) pictorial skill at the service of Janet Frame. Oh, there are a couple of shots of a distant train chugging along past a sunset, but those are negligible if only because they are commonplace. Campion is so responsive to the currents of humanity in this story that she has found the exactly right general locus for her camera—close without close-ups. The camera is attentive, not intrusive.

The cinematography by Stuart Dryburgh adds something else, particularly in the first section—a homely grubbiness. At first it seems like inadequate color, a bit runny, or like slightly undefined focus; but soon it's apparent that Campion and Dryburgh want to suggest a social milieu, crowded, congenial, warmly though somewhat shabbily dressed. From the photography alone, we get some sense of what life is like for this segment of New Zealand society, getting the best out of what they had, in their pullovers and plain dresses, at close quarters.

An Angel at My Table (it's the title of the second of Frame's three volumes) is not often exciting or deeply moving. It's simply interesting. Two qualities distinguish it. First, one female artist of a particular culture wanted to present the life of another female artist of that culture. I don't think it's wisdom after the event to say that certain bonds of sisterly sympathy are manifest throughout, certain avenues of understanding. (There's a cousinly relationship with *My Brilliant Career* [1979], an Australian woman's film from an autobiographical novel by an Australian woman.) Second, the purpose here is to recount a life, rather than to create a drama. This was probably not a fresh film idea when Mark Donskoi made his Gorky trilogy (1938-40). Still, there is something full-souled about the venture, something respectful of the human enterprise as a whole and of art as its adjunct.

In any case, Campion has moved forward healthily. More, please.

***Portrait of a Lady*, Jane Campion, 1996 (*The New Republic*, 23 December 1996)**

Once more unto the breach, dear friends—the breach between a distinguished piece of fiction and a film made from it. This time it is Henry James's 1881 novel *The Portrait of a Lady*. Jane Campion's film summons, once more, a wild fancy: this would be an even better picture than we can think it if the novel didn't exist.

Concede at once that condensation—of James's fifty-five chapters, of his deep explorations of character—was inevitable if we were going to survive the film, which runs 144 minutes as it is. Viewing, contrary to popular assumption, is harder than reading: we have all read for more than 144 minutes many times, but film is more draining per second than reading, more unrelenting in its command of our collaboration. Besides, there is the subconscious imperative of theatrical shape that nags at the back of our brains while viewing, which doesn't occur while reading. Whether the actors are live or photographed, an acted story has temporal obligations.

The screenplay by Laura Jones, who has written for and with Campion in the past, nonetheless tries to frame the events—more important, the moral adventure—in some kind of Jamesian proportion. In 1872, Isabel Archer, a young American woman, is in England at the estate of relatives when she gets a marriage proposal from the highly eligible Lord Warburton. She declines: certainly because she doesn't love him, but certainly, too, because she is hungry for experience, of a

kind she can't specify. Another man proposes, too, while—so to speak—she is observed by her cousin, Ralph Touchett, a gentle soul ill with consumption. After she declines the second man, Ralph persuades his rich, dying father to leave Isabel a large legacy to empower her quest for who knows what. "The conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny" was how James conceived the novel; and Isabel heads for the continent to do her affronting.

In Florence, she meets a fortyish American who lives there, Gilbert Osmond, an aesthete with "an odd mixture of the detached and the involved." He, too, proposes. Isabel takes three years to make up her mind, traveling the while; then, following her destiny, she marries Osmond. Her destiny darkens. The couple has a baby that dies, and they develop an enmity that lives. Previous suitors reappear. For these and other reasons, Osmond becomes even angrier at Isabel. She, for her part, learns disturbing facts about Osmond's past. When Ralph Touchett, back in England, begins to die, Osmond forbids Isabel to go to him. She disobeys. With her lovingly at his side, Ralph dies. The novel ends with her return to Italy, though not necessarily to her marriage. The film leaves us wondering whether she will indeed return to Italy. In either case, there is more destiny to affront.

It is a critical commonplace that Isabel in some ways resembles James himself. She comes from Albany, New York, where James spent some of his childhood. Like James, she is of an era in which the gaining of experience for young Americans of her class meant going to Europe, being seasoned there. Whether or not James would have adapted, to himself and Isabel, Flaubert's "Madame Bovary, *c'est moi*," Campion has colored her film as if he had that empathy. To her, James was not only concerned with "a certain young woman," he was a pioneer in feminist issues as such.

Some of Campion's embroidery is strange, some heavy. The sequence before and under the credits shows us contemporary young women of different races, all in airy gowns in a woodland glade, all circling and beseeching the camera. Perhaps this is to suggest that, even today, the persistent image of young women is that of available nymphs. Interludes in the film take James's implication into the explicit. We see Isabel's frustrated sexual hunger in a dream scene in which she rolls on a bed with her suitors. Her travels in Mediterranean countries are synopsized in a heated fantasy that presents her naked. (Did James ever see a naked woman?)

These additions, and others, seem more than an attempt to assure us that James is up to date: they also seem an attack on Jane Austen's acceptances. Recent Austen films have italicized that her young women have no options in life but to hunt for rich husbands. Isabel is aware of other options (her friend Henrietta Stackpole is a journalist), but, even within the marriage game, she has more nuance, more suggestion of secret shadow; she chafes more at social boundaries. Campion apparently wanted to dramatize this difference from the Austen pattern.

Cinematically, too, Campion is sometimes intrusive. A number of sequences begin with a tilted establishing shot, for no reason except that she wants to remind us that she's at the helm. The cuts between scenes, intended to be elliptical, are sometimes merely jerky. And she leans a lot on great close-ups, which get a bit repetitious even when she keeps the heads off-center.

But, with the exquisite camera work of Stuart Dryburgh, Campion gives us an inviting view of every scene, sometimes a touch tricky (past statuary),

sometimes a touch too picturesque (with huge trees), but on the whole with an eye that searches and perceives. And crowning her work are her accomplishments with her cast—except Shelley Winters as Mrs. Touchett and Shelley Duvall as Countess Gemini. The two Shelleys could have been left wherever they were. Nicole Kidman, for her part, may not be the Isabel Archer of our imagination, but neither is she the Nicole Kidman of our past acquaintance. In the recent, bizarre *To Die For* (1995), she was surprisingly colorful, and here Campion has induced her to mine herself further. Kidman comes up with tones of hurt and resolve and poise and warmth that she has never shown before.

John Malkovich, not always easy to admire, is perfectly cast here, which is itself a rarity. His moodiness and almost disinterested viciousness fit Gilbert Osmond. He gives a performance that, without grotesquerie, makes us scent from the start that there is unpleasantly more to him than Isabel suspects. The most adroit casting is of Barbara Hershey as Madame Merle. Hershey is light-years away from her beginnings in film as a Barbie doll with a voice. Through her three film decades, she has grown and grown, with insufficient praise for her continuing development. Playing the mature American-born woman who has long lived in Europe and has learned from it, Hershey immediately and perfectly suggests complexity.

Martin Donovan, known for his quite different work with Hal Hartley, is touching yet manly as the afflicted Ralph. John Gielgud is his father, a small part but, naturally, unforgettable. (Odd thought: How does a ninety-two-year-old actor feel about playing a deathbed scene?)

And a note of gratitude to the film's Polish composer, Wojciech Kilar. Kilar's music, relying on meditative strings, helps to carry the film along. Campion's choice of Kilar is one more sign that the woman who made *An Angel at My Table* has emerged from the preciousness of *The Piano* (1993) to resume an interesting career.

***Shadows*, John Cassavetes, 1959 (*The New Republic*, 6 March 1961)**

Shadows, an American film directed by John Cassavetes, has a relation to the work of the British Free Cinema, a documentary movement. This film was, as it were, shot free-hand—some of it out of focus and with levels of sound-recording that are often bizarre. All the settings are real New York streets, bars, apartments. As much as anything else, it attempts to bring its environment back alive. Thus it is an exercise in what Siegfried Kracauer calls "the redemption of physical reality." The theory is generally well demonstrated here: the world fixed on film with time figuratively stopped (which is the basic fascination of all photography), and truth as the sum of literal facts.

The story is about two black brothers and their sister: the brothers, who are musicians, are dark brown and light tan, respectively; the pretty sister is light-skinned enough to "pass" for white. Their professional and personal frustrations, bitterness, and resolution are explored with varying effectiveness. Here again the main interest is in method. All the dialogue was improvised by the actors while the camera was in motion; only the story outline was pre-arranged.

Improvisation is becoming one of the more abused facets of acting theory, particularly by those who forget that Stanislavsky intended it only as an exercise

in the preparation of roles. We are told that some of the excellent French film *Breathless* (1960) was improvised, but it was done under a much firmer scenario than *Shadows* and the dialogue was tested before filming. Also, improvisation intended for an audience calls for more than acting ability, and the actors appearing in *Breathless* are keener than those we see in *Shadows*.

Yet much of the American film has a free, jazzy, immediate feeling, a sense of eavesdropping that is provocative. Part of its appeal lies in feeding our subconscious revulsion with the artificial prettiness of most film "pictures" (although there are some seemingly inserted close-ups even here). Most of it is in the adventure of a new dimension possible only to the film.

The dimension is limited, however. Experiment is very welcome in an art so young and already so commerce-ridden. Anyone who cares about films will be glad that *Shadows* was made and will hope that it stimulates other filmmakers. But the logical end of cinematic "reality" is to poke a camera out the window and let it run for two hours; and the end of improvisation is conversation, not drama.

***Opening Night*, John Cassavetes, 1977 (*The New Republic*, 10 June 1991)**

The late John Cassavetes—writer, director, actor—is a problem in American film history. As an actor, in his own pictures and in others, he has unique fire. His portrayal of a desperate, feverishly charming paranoiac in Elaine May's *Mikey and Nicky* (1976) gives life to the crinkled tenets of Method acting. But Cassavetes' own films are troubling.

Clearly they are attempts to cut new roads, heterodox and free, using the "noodling" of hyper-realistic detail to open large territories of dread and pain. But they never quite realize their aim. A valiant attempt has just been made in New York to fix Cassavetes' place in the film firmament, a retrospective of his work, featuring a film that had never had a theatrical release. But *Opening Night* (1977) leaves the subject of Cassavetes as muddy as before.

Opening Night deals with the production of a play that is trying out in New Haven, then heading for Broadway. Most of the film takes place in New Haven. (Nothing looks like anything I ever saw in that city—no small matter in a picture whose unseen motto is "Nitty Gritty.") The story centers on the star of the show, played by Gena Rowlands. She is a drinker, and her tippling is heightened by the death of a fan, a young woman who is killed by another car when she scrambles after Rowlands' limo outside the stage door. The accident becomes a metaphor for the star: to this middle-aging woman, it's as if her last grip on youth had slipped. She is haunted, in fantasy, by reappearances of the young woman. The role that the star is performing in the play-within-the-film is also a middle-aging woman, torn between her ex-husband and a lover. The screenplay is structured, somewhat too neatly, around mirror images throughout, and Cassavetes underlines this pattern by the frequent use of mirrors in his shooting.

But the picture wobbles—for two principal reasons. First, not for the only time in this director's work, Rowlands. She was Cassavetes' wife, and he was devoted to her as an actress, but her acting simply doesn't repay his devotion. It's difficult enough to believe in Rowlands as that actress offstage, but when she is onstage—in rehearsal or performance—the idea that she is a commanding star is quite beyond belief. She has no depth, no resonance, no flourish of technique, no (the inevitable word) personality. Her features are milky and bland, and for some

reason, her eyebrows here are made to curve upward at the inner ends, lending a pitiful touch. The only reason that she is the star of this film, and the play within it, is that she has the most lines and the camera is on her more than on others.

Ironically, Rowlands' defects are italicized by Cassavetes himself. He plays an actor who is the lover in the play and who offstage has been the star's lover. He refers to himself bitterly as a subsidiary actor in the show. But when they are onstage together, Cassavetes blows Rowlands away. She is just a woman with some lines of dialogue, who makes faces consonant with them. He is a power.

Then there's the credibility of the theatrical milieu. Almost everything about the play's production is either cliché or fakery. These aspects combine in the last section, the Broadway opening. Because of her inner turmoil about aging and love, Rowlands turns up at the theater on opening night very late and very drunk. (It's not clear why the packed house has waited for her or why the producer takes so long to speak to the audience.) Rowlands is so soused that she can't walk. The play's director makes her crawl to her dressing room. Then coffee is administered, and we know she will come 'round, will perform, and will get an ovation at the finish. This, from a filmmaker rebelliously interested in truth, is shocking. It's the merest 1930s Hollywood show-biz claptrap.

Still, there is some slash-and-acid in the film, some subtle byplay, particularly from Cassavetes and from Ben Gazzara, who is the show's director. Enough so that Cassavetes remains a problem.

***Gardens of Stone*, Francis Ford Coppola, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 25 May 1987)**

Francis Ford Coppola continues his sad way. His talent doesn't diminish (although it doesn't grow): he just keeps grasping desperately for chances to use it in an increasingly tough film world. He bounces from subject to subject, discernibly searching not for variety but for success.

A Hollywood story editor I know went recently to see another director who started big around the same time as Coppola did, then hit a slide. Arrived at the director's estate, my friend found a Mexican gardener in front and asked him where Mr. So-and-so was. "Out in the back," said the gardener. As my friend started toward the back, the gardener called after him, "He needs a hit." Coppola's previous picture, *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), may have been a success—I don't know—but it and his latest are the work of a man who also needs hits, not of a man doing what he really wants to do. There's no need to indict Coppola for the current conditions of American filmmaking; neither is there any reason to see *Gardens of Stone* as anything other than what it is.

It's a genre picture, one more in a line of U.S. armed forces movies, dressed up with a new setting and a décor of discussion. The picture begins in 1968 at Fort Myer, Virginia; the focus is the training and duty of the Old Guard that accompanies military funerals at Arlington Cemetery. (Hence the title.) The script by Ronald Bass, adapted from a novel by Nicholas Proffitt, is a collection of platitudes: centrally, the young soldier who comes under the command of a sergeant who was his father's Army buddy. The young man is in love with a

colonel's daughter. Also, there's a hulking sergeant-major who is tough on his men but really loves them. Also, the sergeant is divorced and lonely. Talk about Vietnam provides the contemporary glitzing-up of all these stock elements. The sergeant has doubts about the war ("Nothing to win. And no way to win it") yet insists on duty. He cozies up with a *Washington Post* woman reporter who is against the war. (Try to believe that match from either side.) The worst scene in the picture is a trumped-up quarrel at a party between a peacenik lawyer and the sergeant, in which the latter breaks the former's jaw—and is forgiven!

The sergeant is played by James Caan, who was at his best in *The Godfather* (1972) for Coppola and, absent for a few years, now looks much older, full of jaw-clenchings and tears-blinked-back moments. The sergeant-major is James Earl Jones, monstrously fat but weighty in other ways, too. Anjelica Huston, appealingly odd, is the *Post* reporter. The young soldier and his sweetheart are played by two nonentities named D. B. Sweeney and Mary Stuart Masterson.

Through all this farrago of stuff retrieved from Wallace Beery and Victor McLaglen, here seasoned with mod spices, Coppola moves with more than fluency—with an eye refreshingly acute from first shot to last. It's hard to see that he has developed a style, or even styles: he hops from style to style as he finds scripts for which he can get financing. But certainly he is deft. What we're left with, after the deftness, is a clanking army-life flick updated with Vietnam talk, made just eight years after Coppola made the hyperbolic but seriously intended *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

***New York Stories*, Francis Ford Coppola & others, 1989 (*The New Republic*, 27 March 1989)**

Anthology films—the screen equivalent of a bill of one-act plays—were fairly common in the 1950s and 1960s but have almost disappeared. I've missed them, and I was glad to see one coming along. I'm still glad, though it turns out to be a mixed bag: mixed bags are the risk and reward of the form. When a feature film begins poorly, hope for the next hour and a half of your life seems to swirl up out of your body like a visible wraith. But when an anthology film begins poorly, hope, for the other segments, remains.

However, *New York Stories*, a three-parter, begins well. The first segment is the best; then comes a sagging second part, during which hope is a thing with fluttering feathers; then hope is rewarded—the third part picks up smartly, if not to the level of the first. That opener was written by Richard Price, the novelist (*Bloodbrothers*) and screenwriter, and was directed by Martin Scorsese, who after his recent biblical excursion (*The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988) is now back in SoHo, where most of *After Hours* (1985) took place.

Price's screenplay is set—nay, embedded—in the downtown art world. A fortyish painter, Nick Nolte, is celebrated and successful. He is mad about a young painter, Rosanna Arquette, who lived in a cubicle in his huge loft, ran off for a while with another man, and now consents to return, after Nolte pleads, on condition that she doesn't have to sleep with him. He is still mad for her, and she plays his desire the way Itzhak Perlman plays the fiddle. The romance not-quite-*réchauffé* cannot last and doesn't. There are brawls, private and public. (At one point he bellows, as proof of his knowingness, that he had four marriages before she was born.) The real fracture comes not from brawling but because she insists that he

tell her whether or not her painting is good. He knows that a negative answer, or no answer, will finish matters between them. He can't give her the answer she wants. His refusal to lie about art validates him and the story.

Nestor Almendros, the cinematographer of this first part, makes the most of the gobs of paint that this abstract artist wallops and sweeps and smooths onto his huge canvas. Thelma Schoonmaker's sharp editing reflects those spurts and sweeps. Scorsese, a director whose norm of emotional heat is always several notches above average, pitches the episode perfectly for its intensity and for the comedy in the moment and the overview.

Scorsese's choicest work is with his actors. Nolte is not famous for flexibility and depth, but here, bearded and bespectacled, he gives shade and variety to his performance. Arquette, whose prom-queen conceit usually intervenes between us and her sexiness, concentrates so truly on her dissatisfactions that it's easy to understand why Nolte is enslaved. Her caprice, based on discontent with herself, her flashes of near-compassion for Nolte along with her hate for his doglike devotion, are subtleties that presumably Scorsese found in her.

The title of this episode, "Life Lessons," is a small sour joke. The lessons aren't learned.

The third episode, "Oedipus Wrecks," is better than its title. Written and directed by Woody Allen, with himself in the leading role, it's an extended Jewish-mother joke, but it's a pretty good one. There's a twist that I can't disclose except to say that, like his play *The Floating Light Bulb*, it reflects his interest in stage magic.

Allen plays a successful Manhattan lawyer named Sheldon Mills, né Milstein, whose mother still lives in the neighborhood and the mode that he escaped. Allen has a new lover, Mia Farrow, a divorcée with three children, whom he takes home to meet his mother. Mom, Mae Questel, is cordial enough, shows Farrow the baby pictures and so on, but privately she asks her son what he's doing with a blonde with three children. Mom ultimately makes her displeasure overarchingly clear. This results in a change of heart on Farrow's part and an eventual amorous realignment for Allen that pleases Mom.

The theme music of this Allen episode is "I Want a Girl Just Like the Girl That Married Dear Old Dad." (Take *that*, Sophocles.) But my favorite moment, a romantic reverie, involves another song. Allen has had dinner at the home of his second lady friend, who wrapped some pieces of boiled chicken for him to take back home with him. Standing pensively by his apartment window, he pulls a chicken leg from the package and gazes at it as once a swain might have gazed at a locket, while the soundtrack music swells in "All the Things You Are."

Farrow is pleasant. Questel is vivid without any Anne Bancroft or Sylvia Miles clowning. Allen shows yet again that he is a personality, not an actor; seams keep gaping in his performance. But since he knows how to write for himself, he can get away with it.

The middle episode is "Life with Zoe," directed by Francis Ford Coppola, written by him and his daughter, Sofia Coppola. A wealthy twelve-year-old girl lives in the Sherry-Netherland Hotel. Her mother, a famous photographer, globe-trots continually; her father, an even more famous flutist, globe-trots, too. (Incidental note: Coppola's father is a flutist.) Zoe is attended by a butler and spends most of her time with equally wealthy school friends. An even wealthier

boy comes along. The plot then involves a huge diamond, clumsily introduced into the story, that links her father with the beautiful aunt of the rich boy.

It's all meant to have a tart, vaguely Maupassant flavor, but it begins dull and never generates interest. Most of this is due to Coppola as director rather than as author. He cast the principal role poorly: the child is unappealing and dim. Giancarlo Giannini, as the father, is wasted; with Talia Shire (Coppola's sister) as the mother, there is little to waste. Vittorio Storaro's cinematography itself is inaptly gauzy. And Coppola seems always to be scrambling for the right vantage points, like a paparazzo frantic to grab pictures of a celebrity. He even tilts the camera pointlessly during a robbery sequence. The whole segment, which includes a bad gag about a homeless man patronized by the rich child, struggles along without rhythm, charm, or point.

Coppola leaves us where this episode found us: bemused by what seems to be his predicament. Through *Apocalypse Now* (1979), his films, whether successful or not, showed a director with an edge, an ambition, a large-scale identity in formation. Since then, he has not only not developed, he has lost identity. It's as if the strain of *Apocalypse Now* left him stranded, grasping but not reaching.

Coppola is now fifty. Those who admired his earlier work and those who at least recognized the director's character will hope that some sort of self-reclamation is in order. He said once that being a director is "like running in front of a locomotive. If you stop, if you trip, if you make a mistake, you get killed." That's what seems to have been on his mind lately. Maybe he should just get off the tracks for a while and catch his breath.

***The Godfather III*, Francis Ford Coppola, 1990 (*The New Republic*, 21 January 1991)**

Lately I saw tapes of the first two *Godfather* films (1972, 1974) to refresh myself before seeing *The Godfather: Part III*. The faults are still worrisome. The editing leaves fissures. The screenplays don't always make sense. Why do so many loud-mouthed antagonists defy the family without learning from previous examples? Why don't they know they're going to be killed? How could the mass murders at the end of Part I settle anything? How could they be anything but a declaration of war? Al Pacino is still hard to credit as Brando's heir; he looks as if Brando could have him for breakfast. Brando's performance itself is still questionable; among other things, his accent keeps slipping. (He did much better in *The Freshman* [1990], playing off his previous performance.) And we can only be grateful that Diane Keaton is not on screen any more than she is.

Yet the films have qualities that distinguish them from most Mafia films before and since. First is their size. The director and co-writer, Francis Ford Coppola, knew that sheer dimension would give the films a greater gravity than any one or two story strands could produce. Then there's the historical perspective, the sense that we are seeing the continuum of Sicilian life in another setting. This historicity—created by more than Michael's visit to Sicily in Part I—provides a rationale that few other Mafia films convey.

Possibly most important is Gordon Willis's cinematography. Imagine any one scene of those films—same script, same actors—in cruder light with less evocative shadowings, and the whole enterprise is nakedly disclosed as just a gangster picture, only longer. Willis's gold and his different shades of black make

it all look serious. Part III, equally long, is equally uplifted by Willis's camera. It's as if the Corleone family had engaged a master painter to do portraits of these racketeers, drug peddlers, and murderers, and by his art had aggrandized these people of the moral gutter.

Once again the screenplay is by Coppola and Mario Puzo. Once again the structure suggests an opera libretto, with big set pieces—arias, duets, trios, etc.—connected by lesser narrative. Appropriately, then, the last sequence takes place in an opera house—in Palermo, where Michael's son is making his début in *Cavalleria Rusticana* (which itself is set in Sicily). There's no need to detail all that leads up to this finale. I'll just note that the film begins in 1979, when Michael is in his sixties and is being invested with a papal order in New York. At the celebration that follows (reminiscent of the wedding party at the start of Part I), Michael presents a $500 million check for aid to Sicily. This is the sort of touch that gives *The Godfather* mythic power with critics. What critic would be impressed with $500 thousand?

Again, some points in the screenplay are puzzling. In Part I Franco Citti was a Sicilian bodyguard whom we last saw fleeing from the booby-trapped car that killed Michael's bride. Obviously Citti was in on the plot. How come he is now a trusted aide? Further: Is history being revised here? The plot involves a Vatican bank and the murder of Pope John Paul. What do Coppola and Puzo know that we don't know? (And what greater eminence in the world—or out of it—will they find to murder in Part IV?) A skilled Sicilian killer is hired for a big hit in the last sequence, a man famed for his subtlety of assassination. His plan for the hit seems shabby; and when it fails, his desperate substitute is downright stupid. How could he possibly have escaped?

Coppola has also made a major mistake in casting. (Outside of Diane Keaton, who was, I suppose, a given.) He has put his daughter, Sofia, in the role of Michael's daughter. She is not an actress of professional caliber, and she shows little hint of becoming one. In her key moment in the last sequence, at the screening I attended, she got the wrong reaction from the audience.

Al Pacino, of course, plays Michael and plays him somewhat overly stoop-shouldered and antique for a man in his early sixties. This approach doesn't lend much authority to a performance that was never authoritative enough. To beef up his part, the authors give him a few touches of diabetic shock, as a kind of actor's cadenza.

Coppola's sister, Talia Shire, is again Michael's sister. Shire has matured in the years since Part II, which helps. Eli Wallach putters around as a deceptively decrepit capo. Joe Mantegna is good enough as an obstreperous rival of the Corleone clan, though—once again—how does he expect to survive? Donal Donnelly is mouselike as a scheming archbishop. Raf Vallone (a pleasure to see him again) gives plentiful solidity to the cardinal who becomes pope. The chief supporting player, who is really more than that, is Andy Garcia as Michael's nephew. Clearly this young man is going to be Michael's successor. Garcia, who first became noticeable in *The Untouchables* (1987), has seductive strength, homicidal cool. One reason to look forward to Part IV is that he'll fill the center better than Pacino does.

Coppola directs with vigor, skill, and, I'd say, relief. After the troubles he has had since Part II, with unworthy screenplays that wasted his talent, he seems to slip back into another *Godfather* film with a happy sigh. He's like an actor

resuming a role in a previous success after some misadventures. Coppola's relish is manifest. But sometimes his touch is heavy. For instance, a mob hit is planned in a chapel with a huge crucified Christ in the background. On the other hand, one of the hit plannings (there are many) is especially clever: in a kitchen with a TV newscaster talking about the reason for the hit while a thunderstorm roars outside. (Was Coppola remembering the kitchen-and-thunder scene in *The Magnificent Ambersons* [1942]?)

Part of the success of the first two *Godfather* films was presumably due to the usual vicarious thrill of *GoodFellas* (1990) and other Mafia pictures: we move into a criminal society and live by its brutal, greedy standards for a couple of hours. Part III supplies the same thrill, plus the unique quality of this series: we join a family so rich that they have acquired the dignity that riches bring in our world, whatever their source. Ultimately, however, the *Godfather* success may rest on the fact that, structurally, these films are old-fashioned. The nineteenth-century opera libretto, as noted, is a possible paradigm. Martin Scorsese wanted *GoodFellas* to hurtle along, with present-day pace and pulse. Coppola wants to enjoy his story more, without slack but without hurry. This paradoxical combination, of venerable method and contemporary material, may be the base of the *Godfather* appeal.

***Hi, Mom!*, Brian De Palma, 1970 (*The New Republic*, 16 May 1970)**

Brian De Palma, who made *Greetings* (1968), is a twentieth-century version of what the last century called a Bad Boy: a mischievous, likeable scamp. While I watched his latest film, *Hi, Mom!*, I felt like his uncle, shaking my head and chuckling, "Young devil." Imagine—pranks with condoms! (Well, high time. The German writer Grabbe did it in a play in 1822.) *Greetings* had its funny moments and *Hi, Mom!* has even more, but both these clever, generally sharp films, would have, been impossible to anyone but a Bad Boy.

Greetings was about three young New Yorkers and how two of them tried to avoid the draft. *Hi, Mom!* Concentrates on one of the three, Robert De Niro, who was the "peep art" specialist in the earlier picture and was last seen being interviewed in Vietnam. Now he is back, tries to pursue his peeping career with a new kind of porno film, unachieves, gets an acting job in a "total theater" production about blacks, gets trapped into marriage, and gets drastically untrapped.

The screenplay is credited to De Palma, but I assume that the same method was followed as in *Greetings*. There (De Palma said) situations were given to the actors, lines were improvised while a tape recorder rolled, the result was refined, and then it was shot. The plus side of the method (which isn't new) is that you get a nice figurative sense of the people who are making the film bursting *into* the film with high spirits. The negative side is some meandering and some moments that seem funnier to them than to us.

Another trouble is that the subjects aren't, alas, as fruitful for satire as Vietnam. Also there is an apartment house bombing at the end, which, in the light of recent events, left me without an overview to laugh from. There is some confused shooting and editing in the black-theater episode (presented as part of a TV show called *N.I.T.*—National Intellectual Television—*Journal*). But the weakest

element is that the weight of the picture rests on De Niro, who was very good as part of a troika in the first picture but lacks the range and appeal to sustain a film more or less by himself. The most professional appearance is by the very funny Allen Garfield, who was the porno salesman in *Greetings* and here is a porno film producer with quality standards.

Sags and all, *Hi, Mom!* is infectious with intelligent and perceptive high spirits. (I won't explain the title; the picture does that.) And there are moments of fine filming, like the opening shot. We see the doorway of an East Side tenement and, at the end of the dark hall, the backyard. The camera moves down the hall into the rubbishy yard and surprises the surly janitor at work there, who thereupon scolds the camera for sneaking up on him.

***Dressed to Kill*, Brian De Palma, 1980 (*The New Republic*, 23 August 1980)**

Like nature, film criticism abhors a vacuum. What's wanted at all times is a stylist to sing about—more than one, if possible. The style itself doesn't matter—Max Ophüls or Samuel Fuller—so long as the writer can a) concentrate on it juicily; b) discount content; c) discount those who consider content. The whole project becomes a means of sorting out those who can really "see" films from those who can't, those who "love movies" from those who, like myself, would be embarrassed to be under that soppy rubric. I'm always a bit relieved when I fail the test (though I don't always).

I've failed again. The latest stylistic laureate, who has been getting nearer and nearer to it through recent years, is the still-young American director Brian De Palma. His latest film, *Dressed to Kill*, seems to be a box-office hit and a critical one. De Palma specializes in scare and murder: *Sisters* (I walked out of that 1973 picture), *Carrie* (1976), *The Fury* (1978), although his first released pictures were comic hijinks, *Hi, Mom!* (1970) and *Greetings* (1968). Nowadays the comparison most often slapped on him is Hitchcock, and in a few respects, the comparison is deserved.

For instance, *Dressed to Kill* is constructed to provide occasions for cinematic "arias," like those in Hitchcock. De Palma wrote his script around three such main sequences: a cat-and-cat game in the Metropolitan Museum between a man and a woman; a scene between a hooker and a New York psychiatrist in his office during a thunderstorm at night (neither of them comments on it though I've never seen such a huge storm in this city); and a scare sequence at the end that has a basic resemblance to the last sequence in *Carrie*. In these three sections—and elsewhere—De Palma certainly weaves extraordinary silk-and-polyester texture. His camera glides (much more insinuatingly than Kubrick's in *The Shining* [1980]), the editing is acute, the compositions are generally economical and strong. True, he overuses big close-ups right from the beginning, and he stoops to one of the dreariest clichés—a shot with a telephone large in the foreground so that you know the character in the background is coming to pick up the phone. But it's pretty hard to fault his skills.

Next question: Is that enough? And next question: Does skill—the proper word for De Palma, I think, not style—justify everything? Excuse all faults? Compensate for all vacancies? Before anyone mentions the name Flaubert, I'll quote the much-quoted passage myself: "In literature there are no such things as beautiful subjects. . . . One can write about any one thing equally well as about any

other." But Flaubert did not say there is no such thing as a subject; and he went on immediately to say: "The artist must raise everything to a higher level."

And what is the subject of *Dressed to Kill*? The agonies of a homicidal transvestite. (I'm not tipping the plot—not very much. Any seasoned viewer will guess the key gimmick long before it's revealed, and it's revealed long before the end.) It would be ludicrous to suggest that this subject is "raised" in Flaubert's sense—it's merely exploited for sex and violence, the sex seamy and the violence unwatchable. (Razors.) If you've been waiting for a work to reveal the connections between sex and violence—which means if you're under the age of, say, nine—*Dressed to Kill* will enlighten you. Otherwise it may seem, as it did to me, high-gloss exploitation.

The apostles already contend that the center of the film is the very fact that it has no plot or moral center. It begins with a well-to-do woman, maritally unsatisfied, who cruises New York to (the phrase used) get laid. Later the focus shifts to her bright teenaged son, about whom she has made a laboriously contrived sexual joke, and a hooker. The boy is monastically pure, but the hooker is stock-market mad. The detective on the case is a vulgarian. If things aren't grubby enough by then, you get a gang of black youths chasing the (blonde) hooker through the subway to rape her. And the film ends with the pure boy comforting the frightened hooker in his mom's bed, so—who knows?—he may be about to become a citizen of De Palma's centerless world, just as we fade out. But *is* De Palma a new Céline, a new Georges Bataille? I get no such anti-conviction conviction from the film. I get only that because virtually all taboos are now taboo, pictures like *Dressed to Kill* can be made.

Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) has been invoked a lot in discussing this film, because of the transvestite and because there are two, count 'em, two shower scenes with naked women, start and finish. (Modesty note: In the first one Angie Dickinson caresses her body, as she watches her husband shave with a premonitory open razor, and the camera snaps from face to breast and pubis. Interviews assert that only the face is Dickinson's. A nice touch. She doesn't mind our thinking that we're seeing her body as long as it's someone else's.) I'm no *Psycho* addict, but the comparison seems glib. The script of *Psycho*, by Joseph Stefano from a Robert Bloch novel, has a narrative and "viewpoint" center, and no plot holes. In De Palma's film, how did the murderer know that the victim would forget a ring and come back upstairs? And Hitchcock doesn't use a dream for an extra dollop of thrills. And Hitchcock suggests, with dramatic music; De Palma shows, with oily music. In the famous *Psycho* shower scene, says James Naremore, "Out of more than fifty separate shots, only one shows a knife entering a body . . . a tiny puncture. Even in this explicit shot, there is no blood." De Palma details the razoring. (Not to me. I had to look away).

The most important similarity of *Dressed to Kill* to *Psycho* I haven't seen mentioned. One of Hitchcock's biggest shocks is "outside" the film, a violation of audience confidence. When we see a star in a film, see her early, we expect her to go substantially through the picture. One of the strongest jolts in *Psycho* is that Janet Leigh gets murdered so soon. De Palma apes this device; he relies on us, watching the film, to supply a violable orthodoxy.

The performances don't need comment.

I haven't been so depressed by a skillfully made film since the post-*Nashville* Altman crop in the mid-'70s. What ability De Palma has. What emptiness.

What glorying in that emptiness as proof that he's a true *auteur*. Well, at least the filmniks are happy once more: they have a new "stylist."

Scarface, Brian De Palma, 1983 (_The New Republic_, 9 & 16 January 1983)

Another remake. The new *Scarface* is a panderers' picture. The original, directed by Howard Hawks and released in 1932, has been as overrated as are most good American films by rhapsodists eager to create pantheons, but, despite Paul Muni's overacting in the title role, it was directed with cinematic imagination; and it was written in Ben Hecht's high style—facile, flashy cynicism. The Hawks film is a relatively serious attempt by the best show biz of the time to examine the criminal world of the time for its greed and blood lust, also as a pressure cooker for sexual aberrance. Tony Camonte, based on Al Capone, burns with animal greed and brutality, and at least part of his fire is sublimated desire for his sister. The last sequence, in which she joins him in the shootout against the police even though he has just murdered her newlywed husband, is true Hawks-Hecht, a quick skim of profundities made impressive by professional skills.

No one could maintain that the 1932 *Scarface* was done without hope of profit (the co-producer was Howard Hughes); still, its various clevernesses provide the kind of pleasure that even the president of the A.S.P.C.A. might get at a bullfight by a leading matador. This new *Scarface* is as if that same president were at an Elizabethan bearbaiting.

The new *Scarface* seems to take its tone, stylistically and otherwise, from the mansion in which its protagonist ends up. This time called Tony Montana, he is a Cuban sent to Florida in the Castro shipments of 1980. He rises from Miami dishwasher to the top of the drug trade in less than three years and lives in an immense house furnished like the lounges of 1920s movie palaces. That seems appropriate enough for this Tony (although there's a wee question about how he got so *much* money so quickly), but, more sickeningly, that décor seems the crystallization of the sort of filmmaking employed by the director throughout. Brian De Palma's vision of Montana's dream fits perfectly with De Palma's own view of filmmaking. All of this film, even its most squalid settings, as well as its characterizations and narrative, is as overblown and banal and vulgar as that ultimate villa.

Poor old Tony Camonte never had it so good so fast. Of course the money in the drug trade today would have been far beyond Camonte's nakedest dream of avarice. Near the end, though relatively soon after his rise to power, Tony Montana is supposed to be clearing ten to twelve million a month. He dies after some hoglike snuffling of a mound of cocaine on his desk that is worth more money than Camonte (Capone) probably ever saw. Everything is inflated, including the size of international criminal operations and of ill-gotten gains. The film audience's threshold of excitement has also risen. Violence gets more violent, gaudiness gets more gaudy, characters get more streamlined, cinematic style gets less subtle. De Palma and pals are out to pander to new gluttonies, and they have picked the right material, both as excuse and as medium. Hawks's *Scarface* treated a subject; De Palma's *Scarface* hitches a ride on its subject. Characters in the Hawks film are written and acted with some obligation to shatter stereotypes of crime films; with De Palma, characters are stuffed back into their stock shells. For example, the girl

whom De Palma's Tony wins from his boss is played by a Barbie doll; for Hawks, she was a good actress with a real face, Karen Morley.

Block by block, De Palma has built his career largely on imitation, usually of Hitchcock, from his very first film. *Murder à la Mod* (1968), through *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Blow Out*. (1981). When *Scarface* was announced, I expected a Hawks imitation: the only surprise is that it's something of a Coppola imitation, reaching for the sudden eruption of blood into phony *luxe* that marked *The Godfather* (1972). But De Palma doesn't have the talent that Coppola (once) showed. Not one of the sequences or compositions in this *Scarface*, from a murder in a Cuban refugee camp, to nightclub shootouts, to *luxe* circular bathtubs, does anything but *remind* us—frequently of films we wish we hadn't seen in the first place—and thereby reminds us of De Palma's bankruptcy. His idea of a "touch" is to have the camera come close to Tony's eyes, accompanied by ominous music, whenever he looks at his sister with as-yet unacknowledged incestuous lust.

The violence in this new *Scarface* was much publicized in advance through its difficulty in getting an R-rating, and if I didn't believe that the ratings examiners are honest, I'd suspect that De Palma's distributors paid for the advance fuss. The violence is not discernibly more bloody or frequent than in a picture I saw just the night before called *Uncommon Valor* (1983), which got its R without publicity. De Palma's one notable contribution was possibly inspired by *The Texas Chain-Saw Massacre* (1974): while Tony is forced to watch, a drug dealer torments him by (off-screen) amputating the arm and leg of a pal with a chain saw.

The story, written by Oliver Stone, is the very boring and predictable arc of a criminal's rise and fall, not new with the first *Scarface* or with *Little Caesar* (1931) or *The Public Enemy* (1931). Whether or not you know Hawks's film, you know, after the first ten minutes of this *Scarface,* what the outline is of the next 160 minutes. The general shape is still the Hecht shape, and a few of the details of the original are retained, like the electric sign reading "The World Is Yours," which, seen early, is seen again at the bloody end (and which I have always thought the nadir of Hecht's Broadway cynicism). Inevitably we get a few sops to "right thinking," passed off as deepenings of character. This new Tony hates communists; won't murder a man by blowing up his car because the man's wife and kids are with him (though Tony blows out the brains of the man sitting next to him to prevent the "bad" murder); spouts a fake Hamlet speech about the meaning of life. "What is a man, / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed?" gets translated into the vulgate for a drunken speech by the rich Tony in a nightclub. He walks out telling the gaping patrons that they need him because he's the bad guy who makes them feel good. With this profundity—that we all rest easier because there are murderers with wealth and power—the picture leaves us to reel.

The script does make one moralistic change from Hecht, perhaps because, contradictorily, it affords a chance for sexual explicitness. In Hawks's film, after Tony guns down his best friend because he thinks the friend is shacking up with his sister, he finds out that his sister and the friend had just been married; nevertheless, during the final shootout, the frenzied sister, responding to instincts deeper than grief, helps Tony load his guns. With De Palma the same mistaken murder occurs, but Tony's sister does not forgive him or help him. Instead, when trouble arrives, she comes into his study, virtually undressed, demented, and taunts him about what he has really wanted all along before she starts shooting at

him herself. This change plays both sides of a twisty street: it keeps the sister from forgetting her murdered husband, and it also provides a little extra sexual tease.

Note another change. In Hawks the last shootout is against the police. In De Palma that shootout is against a small army of thugs loosed on Tony by a Bolivian drug mogul whom he has betrayed. The size of that thug army, the speed with which it is summoned, the implications of international reach, the immense arsenal of huge weapons—these are all part of the tonal design that runs throughout this film and ends at Tony's Napoleonic desk. Nothing exceeds like excess.

The last disgust is for Al Pacino, who plays Tony. His chief power as an actor is in violence or the threat of it. When he gets a part that can use that power in a work of some substance, like David Mamet's play *American Buffalo* or Sidney Lumet's film *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), his talent gives it life and resonances. But unlike other actors of murderous roles such as James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson, he has no range; he just sells violence wherever anyone will hire him to do it, like a mercenary soldier who doesn't care whom he shoots so long as he's paid. It's disgusting to see Pacino pouring the gifts he has used well elsewhere into this sewer. (He does assume a good Cuban accent.)

This film is dedicated to Howard Hawks and Ben Hecht. I haven't seen a more hopeless attempt at aggrandizement-through-dedication since William Friedkin adapted his sorry *Sorcerer* (1977) from *The Wages of Fear* (1953) and dedicated his distortion to Henri-Georges Clouzot, who made the original.

The Untouchables, Brian De Palma, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 2 June 1987)

Brian De Palma likes old movies and has spent much of his career trying to make them. At last he has made a good one. *The Untouchables*, derived from the TV series and some books about it, raises De Palma to the height of his movie-buff devotion, to the point where he behaves like an old-time Hollywood director reincarnated. His new film resembles an early 1930s automobile restyled by a 1980s designer, with the old car quite discernible and the modernization quite snappy.

The Untouchables reached theater screens once before as *The Scarface Mob* (1958), which was a pilot film for the TV series that was also released theatrically. I missed it. (De Palma's own deplorable *Scarface* four years ago, in 1983, had nothing to do with Capone.) For his new film, De Palma asked the theater poet of Chicago, David Mamet, to do the screenplay. This was the first piece of acute casting. It's impossible to say how much of the handling of scenes is Mamet's work, but surely the structure owes much to him, and of course the dialogue is his. Mamet, in a way, anticipated De Palma's direction. The rule seems to have been: "Don't change the old reliable Gangster Picture: just do it better." Mamet plunged into the middle of the mainstream and succeeded. The old-timers had more freedom than Mamet. Ben Hecht's script for the 1932 *Scarface* used incest to sizzle it along. The Thew-Glasmon-Bright script for *The Public Enemy* (1931)—still my favorite gangster picture—was composed of a series of plaque-like scenes almost like a medieval mystery play. Mamet, revisiting the past, could not alter it. He sought no "angle": he took the Capone-Ness story as a great chance to revel in the most conventional aspects of a genre.

Still, there are perceptible Mamet touches. Some examples: the language of

a seasoned old cop, Jim Malone, who joins Ness's small anti-Capone force (with Mamet's ear, it can hardly be an accident that Malone rhymes with Capone); the language of Scarface Al himself, which dumps on us like a truckload of rocks; a fierce hand-to-hand fight between two gray-haired men, Malone and a police captain; Ness's wry last line—the last line of the picture after the smoke has cleared from these Prohibition battles. A reporter asks him what he'll do if Prohibition is repealed, and he says, "I think I'll take a drink."

The story is simple enough, plentiful enough. In 1930 Eliot Ness, a Treasury agent, arrives in Chicago with wife and child and sets out, against odds and apathy, to nail Capone. He recruits three loyal aides, one of them Italian to show us that not all Italians are gangsters. (Racial epithets are, quite accurately for the time, part of the invective throughout.) Ness meets setbacks in tactics and in law; eventually, with the help of the Treasury accountant who is one of his team, he proceeds with the tax-evasion approach that finally puts Capone in prison. Many gunfights; many raids; many confrontations. There's even a "Western" episode on the Canadian border—with a troop of Mounties on the skyline *à la* John Ford—as Ness and friends ride to seize a truck convoy of whiskey. (No explanation of how these city types learned to ride.) The ending is foretold not only by history but by the movies; what matters is how we get there.

This De Palma knew and relished. Many of his visual fandangos in the past, like the museum sequence in *Dressed to Kill* (1980), were film-school smart-aleckings. They're not entirely gone from *The Untouchables*: a heavy reference to the *Potemkin* (1925) baby carriage in a railroad station shoot-out; a pullback from a shot of two men talking behind a window to reveal that they are in a plane. But most of the time, this time, the subject has carried De Palma from mere showing off to some virtuosity—in other words, the showing off is done so well that it helps. He uses Panavision and justifies it in the very first shot. The wide screen is filled with an overhead view of a barber shop, looking straight down on a barber chair, its occupant's face swathed in a towel, the chair surrounded by henchmen and reporters. It is brilliantly lighted (by Stephen H. Burum), immensely detailed, loaded with promise. The split-second effect is of full-color magic archaeology: the mound of intervening years has been swept away and we are looking into the 1930 life of Chicago, the fief of Al Capone—who is the man in the chair.

Shot after shot, cut after cut, De Palma rarely falters. A bundle of newspapers plunks onto a red carpet outside a hotel, and a bellboy bustles out to get them; Ness and Malone converse in a church, and the camera looks up past them at the gorgeous ceiling; the camera tracks along the outside of a ground-floor apartment as a hit man watches his victim through the windows. And after a machine gun starts spitting, there's a shock cut to a close profile of an opera tenor in clown costume singing "*Vesti la giubba*" ("On with the motley"), from *Pagliacci*. Hitchcock and Hawks are still very much at De Palma's back, but they might have approved compositions like the one in which Ness alone confronts Capone and his bodyguards on a grand hotel staircase and the action seems to pour forward onto Ness. In further deference to the past, De Palma even uses a device I haven't seen in years. When a person falls through the air these days, we see only the start and the finish. But when one of these gangsters is shoved off a roof, we get a close-up matte shot of the falling man while the building races away behind him,

Kevin Costner, who is Ness, doesn't come on like a ball of fire, but his strength and humor keep growing. Sean Connery plays the aging Malone as if he

had done James Bond and all the other roles just to season himself for this one, to make the old cop both true and retrospective. Charles Martin Smith is right as the wistful, heroic accountant. Andy Garcia is snakelike as the fourth member of the Ness quartet. Robert De Niro, whose first film appearance was in De Palma's *Greetings* (1968), gives Capone the clumsy theatricality of a barbarian who wants to be a ham, and also gives him the insane fury that we remember from Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), still frightening.

It used to be a critical commonplace to compare gangster films to Westerns. The comparison is now historical because Westerns have faded so badly. (Two possible explanations for that fade: space flicks now supply a setting for black- and-white morality and broad action; at titudes toward Indians have changed.) But the gangster, whatever his new name or game, is not only still present in our society, his presence is swollen—so much that the underworld sometimes seems to be the real world while the rest of us dawdle in the deer park of criminal kings.

Forty years ago Robert Warshow wrote: "Most Americans have never seen a gangster. What matters is that the gangster *as an experience of art* is universal to Americans." The facts of our life and art experience, fueled additionally now by television, make *The Untouchables* simultaneously relevant yet quaint. With its battles over mere booze, with Capone's brazen antics, De Palma's film seems in a ghastly way almost innocent. By now the slouching beast has made it to Bethlehem.

Casualties of War, Brian De Palma, 1989 (*The New Republic*, 2 October 1989)

Through most of his career Brian De Palma has been too clever for his own good. Once, with *The Untouchables* (1987), he was clever enough. Now that he has chosen the largest subject of his life, he isn't clever at all. Few would have expected that, when he tackled the Vietnam War, he would address it with commensurate depth, but at least there was a chance that he might show some ingenuity. *Casualties of War* turns out, however, to be clumsy and banal. It's as if De Palma had become embarrassed about his usual slickness, in relation to this material, but then had nothing to put in its place.

Still, he has profited in a way by his choice of subject. Some of the press have apparently taken his very choice of serious material as proof in itself that he has dealt with it seriously. He hasn't. He gives us a chance to look once more at a perennial and terrible subject—what happens to the humanity of relatively decent men when they are plunged into war—but he fumbles his treatment of it.

The central act of the film is the kidnapping of a Vietnamese girl by U.S. soldiers, her rape, and her murder. The night before they go out on patrol, a squad of five men wants to go to a village near their base to visit a brothel. But passes are canceled because the Viet Cong is in the village, presumably using the brothel. Vindictively, when the squad is out the next day, the sergeant orders them to grab a girl from a village and bring her along. In time four of the five soldiers rape her. The exception is Eriksson, the newcomer in the squad, who tries to protect and free the girl, and fails. Later she is murdered, for the squad's convenience.

We then move to Part Two—Eriksson's struggle at the base camp to bring the four other members of the squad to justice. He has to fight the army's

protectiveness of its own, its unwillingness to make waves, its prejudice against villagers on the suspicion that many of them are Cong supporters. But Eriksson persists, and eventually the judicial wheels roll.

All this is framed by a postwar encounter in a suburban train back home when Eriksson glimpses a young Asian woman who reminds him of the Vietnamese girl. (Eriksson must have a busy time flashing back if he sinks so completely into memory every time he glimpses a young Asian woman in America.) At the end we return to the train. The young woman understands somehow that he has been going through a mnemonic torment and assures him—either out of some Delphic power in herself or on order from the film's producers—that the bad dream is over now, all will be well.

We never learn what this means. (Will he forget about the Vietnamese girl? Will he accept what happened to her as just one of those things? What in the world does the ending *mean*?) But this closing assurance is given to Eriksson over a swelling chorus of angelic voices that is only the last offense in one of the most ludicrous scores ever plopped onto a purportedly serious picture. It was composed by Ennio Morricone, who has drooled musically over more than 175 pictures—to judge by the ones I've seen, anyway—and here contributes this film's outstanding blotch. The score under the suspense sequences sounds like the organ stuff that used to accompany suspense in silent pictures; Eriksson's pronouncements about morality and justice are heard over horn chords; and those heavenly, redemptive voices at the end are the crowning marshmallow. Whatever the film's claims to gravity, Morricone's music helps to dim them. But then the director who made this hollow picture is the man who commissioned the score.

He is also the director who commissioned David Rabe to write the screenplay from a book by Daniel Lang. Rabe is one of the most overrated American playwrights, probably the one most likely to lapse into undergraduate irony and sermonizing on the subject of war. In his screenplay all the characters seem familiar, not from life but from previous films or plays or novels; all of them are pushed around like charade figures to symbolize Quality A in conflict with Quality B. Following the story is thus less like watching a drama unfold than like watching a recipe being filled: a cup of bitterness, a spoonful of lust, a dash of remorse, etc. Except for the suffering of the girl—very easy to convey—the story is detached and unaffecting, though guns are going off and people are being killed throughout.

Whenever we might possibly begin to be involved, the dialogue bars us. Admittedly, this is partly because the actors are incomprehensible about 30% of the time. Mostly it's because Rabe ranges from the war-movie cliché to the stagy to the incredibly fancy. I thought I heard one tough grunt refer to Winnie the Pooh; I know I heard the bestial sergeant make a wordplay on a line from Psalms: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

This film was supposed to be a drama of cause and effect, the crime against the girl as catalyst for Eriksson's struggle with the military. But the first part is so synthetic that Part Two seems a protracted, puny epilogue instead of a courageous resolution. (And would the girl's body still be lying where it fell—in the same condition—by the time the Army got around to investigating the case?)

Rabe has dissociated himself from the finished film, and has done even that in a woolly, ambiguous manner. I hope that his displeasure with the picture begins

with his own contribution. Unless De Palma tampered with every line, Rabe can't get off the hook so airily.

Stephen H. Burum was the cinematographer of *The Untouchables* and did a good job of making history look both present and historical in that film. Here, however, he shows a strange talent for transforming real locations into phony back-lot settings. In fact De Palma made the outdoor sequences in Thailand, but the squad's first night patrol is lighted in a way that makes every tree seem spurious. This peculiarity recurs.

The casting and the acting are mostly deplorable. Thuy Thu Le is moderately affecting as the victimized girl, but any Asian actress, speaking a strange language, bound and ravaged by brutes, would have to be inordinately dull not to be affecting. Several members of the squad demonstrate casting at the stock level. Sean Penn, for one—as the sergeant of the squad and the instigator of the abduction—is rankly dreadful. He does an imitation of Robert De Niro that deteriorates into parody, seemingly encouraged by De Palma, with overdone pauses between lines and actorish gestures between phrases.

As Eriksson, Michael J. Fox does his best, but it's a lightweight best. Besides, he suffers from De Palma's nineteenth-century-melodrama casting: if you want to show that one member of a group is morally superior to the others, put a clean-cut fellow in the good-guy role and put tough mugs in the others. The film might have been marginally more interesting if Penn, tightly directed, had played Eriksson and someone credible as a rugged vet (like Tom Berenger in *Platoon* [1986]) had done the sergeant.

De Palma, ultimately responsible for all the above, is immediately responsible for the banalities of composition and motion—the slow, sentimental dissolves (in a supposedly hard-nosed picture), the silhouette shots of soldiers crossing ridges against the sunrise (militarily stupid and cinematically hoary). Some of the suspense intercutting—as when Fox is trapped, his legs having gone through the top of a Cong tunnel, while a Vietnamese crawls through the tunnel toward the dangling legs with a knife in his mouth—would have embarrassed Edwin S. Porter, director of *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Not one moment in the whole film shows an original or even keenly imaginative eye. At best the direction is commonplace, at worst pretty dumb (a latrine sequence, for instance).

It seems a rule when writing about Vietnam films to place a new one in relation to others. Obediently, I note that two are still outstanding: *Hamburger Hill* (1987), for its re-creation of combat hell, and *Platoon*, which transcends its schema to achieve what De Palma bungles—the moral transformation of men in war. De Palma is just a derivative Hollywoodnik who, in this case, hasn't even been able to bite off more than he can chew.

The Seven Deadly Sins, Jean-Luc Godard & others, 1962 (*The New Republic*, 22 December 1962)

One puzzle is the "anthology" film—the picture made up of separate short episodes on related themes. Why make such a film without a set of sharp scriptlets—funny or biting or moving but all with point? A recent wave of them has revealed no such basis. Now comes *The Seven Deadly Sins* (directors: Philippe de Broca, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Demy, Sylvain Dhomme, Jean-Luc Godard,

Édouard Molinaro, Roger Vadim), a French film whose seven episodes explore the sins of the catechism. It is so freighted with directorial, writing, and acting talent that the flatness of the result is upsetting.

How could Godard have thought there was anything in, and have contributed so little to, the feeble risqué joke in "Laziness"? How could de Broca have so thoroughly excluded his comic gifts from "Gluttony"? Where did Félicien Marceau and Chabrol get the nerve to write and direct "Greed"? Can they really not know that the story of the posh prostitute who refunds the price of the cadet's lottery ticket is—if I may be forgiven—hoary? (It was one of Alexander Woollcott's favorites.)

"Pride," by Vadim, is at least a neatly machined French-type skit about an errant wife's piquant reason for reform. But the only episode really worthy of its sin is "Anger," written by Eugène Ionesco (his first screenplay) and directed by Dhomme. Satan is strolling about in bored human form on a bonny *bourgeois* Sunday and decides to stir things up. By putting a fly in every husband's Sunday soup, he ignites a fuse that leads from family quarrels to world cataclysm. Its wit and imagination indicate that Ionesco has a pretty sense of how to play with film possibilities to some purpose. An anthology film entirely by Ionesco (who has always been at his best in short bursts)—now there is an idea.

Alphaville, Jean-Luc Godard, 1965 (*The New Republic*, 20 November 1965)

Central to Jean-Luc Godard's latest film *Alphaville*, which is a purportedly serious science-fiction thriller, is its choice of leading actor. Eddie Constantine is a waffle-faced, iron-jawed, American-born hoofer who went to France fifteen years ago and there made a huge success in fifty pictures about an FBI agent named Lemmy Caution—pictures that are no more likely to be shown in the United States than Italian Westerns. Godard took this now-famous character and its actor as the protagonist of his film, subtitled *Tarzan vs. IBM*, which is as if an English director who wanted to make a serious comment in thriller form used, as protagonist, James Bond played by Sean Connery. Thus from the start, from *before* the start, the French audience shared a small conspiracy of parody and point with Godard that is his private joke when the picture goes abroad.

Alphaville itself is a city somewhere in the future. Lemmy Caution arrives there from earth on a private-eye mission, gets involved with a girl (tuberous Anna Karina), chases a mysterious scientist-dictator through public buildings and streets and laboratories, and finally takes the girl back with him to earth. Throughout, he is teaching her the meaning of individuality and love in this mechanized city. Her last words, as she rides away with him, are her first utterance of "*Je . . . vous . . . aime.*"

The visual fillip of the film is that Godard shot all the scenes of this future city in the Paris of today: the neon boulevards, the modern lobbies, the antiseptic corridors. That is the most effective device in a picture that leaps, goat-like, from one device to the next. (In conversation Godard has said: "People say it's about a man of today in the world of tomorrow. But it is really about a man of yesterday in the world of today.") There is a scene in which men are executed for having shown emotion, machine-gunned on a diving board over a pool and then finished off by bathing beauties armed with knives; there are Wellesian shots of Akim Tamiroff, whose living apparently depends on not shaving too often; there is

literary name-dropping on the soundtrack; but these all contribute less than the fact that Monsieur Godard could shoot this picture in his own Paris.

It starts as a lively burlesque of tough private-eye nonsense, all slinky sex and casual slaughter. It quickly degenerates into a banal thesis film: the need to preserve the soul in a soulless landscape. What is dependably wearisome about Godard is that, though he is of the film filmic, *Nouvelle Vague* and *Cahiers du cinéma* to his back teeth, every one of his pictures sooner or later bogs down in extended portentous talk that is only *accompanied* by pictures, like a lecture with slides. That unhappy inevitability is worsened here because the mysterious scientist, unseen, is equipped with an electric voice-box like those given to people whose larynxes have been surgically removed.

As with much of all modern art, Godard is critically prized even when he is despised because he provides opportunities for verbiage. Film critics (and what man who has ever written a review of any kind does not also consider himself a film critic?) expatiate on Godard particularly because his films are often apropos of such vogue subjects as popular culture and its latest stunted offspring, pop art. Many of these critics seem agonized because they like fine art and also like popular art. This has been true of a good many cultivated people through history, but because they were usually less aesthetically and intellectually self-conscious, they did not feel puritanically compelled to justify the same sensibility's enjoyment of both Flaubert and Fleming, Éluard and Ellington. Now the ceremony of innocence is drowned indeed—in floods of dubious exegesis; and as long as Godard can provide these seemingly catholic but essentially guilt-ridden intellectuals with materials for discourse, he is sure of attention.

The difficulty, for one viewer at least, is that most of his films are, for the most part, no more interesting than the articles about them. At best they are usually a cinematic person's acts of daring—to be uncinematic and to be deliberately corny. (Here the use of Caution-Constantine, the sci-fi atmosphere, the banal theme.) But it is premature parody. As Mary McCarthy in *The Group* tried to disguise her inadequate grip of her material by pretending that she was satirizing it, so Godard pretends to be doing a double- or triple-take on trite material. Generally it is icing without the cake.

Vladimir and Rosa, Jean-Luc Godard, 1971 (*The New Republic*, 1 May 1971)

A new film from Jean-Luc Godard these days is like a message from exile. He is over there, with the rest of the self-exiled, in the Siberia that is physically interwoven with our society yet far remote, waiting for the explosion that he counts on as final justification. Each new film is like a breath on a fuse he believes to be smoldering. He's trying to free himself of art, of even revolt against art, yet each film betrays at least some traces of—horrid individualist word—talent. Each film shows the longing of an artist for *conclusion*, a particular weakness of artists in political works. In *Le Gai savoir* (*Joy of Learning*, 1968), through his two principal actors, he apologizes at the end for what he has been forced to leave out and says that Straub in Germany and Bertolucci in Italy will make the real films for the masses. Two of the most hyper-aesthetic filmmakers alive! Yet a final torch had to be uplifted. Near the end of this latest film, an actor calls on workers and students and farmers to unite—to begin uniting at once. Why not call on them to become six feet tall and immortal at once?

Yet this new film, *Vladimir and Rosa*, is the most effective agitprop of his post-"bourgeois" films that I've seen. (There are several others, including one about Italy and one about Palestine guerrillas, not yet shown in the United States. He says that *Vladimir and Rosa i*s to help pay for the Palestine film.) Godard has forsaken the method of *See You at Mao* (1970) and *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968), and *Pravda* (1969), which depended in large part on the contrasts of surrealist collage, and is using here what can be called Street Theater with interludes.

The main story is a fantasy-burlesque of the Chicago Conspiracy Trial. I can't explain the title: I can only supply a few facts. Vladimir was Lenin's first name, and there seems to be a voice on the soundtrack of someone called Vladimir. There is also a person (not a character, really) called Karl Rosa, who gets his name, I assume, from Liebknecht and Luxemburg. (All three historical personages figured in *Pravda*.) Theory-and-practice is supposed to be the theme of this new film, though this is not demonstrated. There are caricatures in it based on Bobby Seale and Judge Hoffman and William Kunstler—called John here, and criticized as a knowing ham. Anne Wiazemsky is also one of the symbolic defendants.

Interludes include a wild TV press conference run by Kunstler; an allegory about Women's Liberation, in which a girl stands behind a man and reads a feminist manifesto while he mouths the words, to prove that the gender of the voice alters the meaning of sexual statements; a sequence in which Godard himself, with a sound engineer, strolls back and forth along a tennis net discussing politics while tennis is being played; a scene in which a man mentions the United States, the USSR, and Israel, after each of which Godard, in cop's uniform, gives a Nazi salute and says "*Sieg heil!*" then opens his fly and pulls out a night-stick.

That's funny, because it's more than a joke. Some elements of the trial are also funny: like some of the caricature of Judge Hoffman and the jury—only six—who stand throughout and who are about as impassive as judges at a dog show. There is even some humor in the unconcealed cheapness with which the picture is made: most of the trial is shot in close-ups against a piece of cloth tacked on a wall, like television drama in 1950. The disregard for facsimile is part of the joke.

There is plenty of cinematic hijinks: the images of two fists, with letters on the back of each, coming together to spell a word as they break a ruler on which a message is written; flashes of the Marx Brothers and Brecht; passages of black screen while voices explain the blackness. Yet despite the filmic display, the effect is of Street Theater, explication by acting, by living posters, propagandizing by inviting the audience to laugh at cruelty and dishonesty. Many sections reminded me of films I've seen of plays being performed in North Vietnam villages for the rather lighthearted encouragement of the audience. But one difference here is the absence of communal reliance: in the North Vietnamese plays, the actors are part of the audience and are easy. Here the actors have the frivolity of frenzy.

And the frivolity is inconsistent. Some of the film is undergraduate jape. The criticism of imperialism, both American and Soviet, has all the usual triteness and rhetoric, all the usual sanctification of Mao that depends on our not knowing as much about China as we do about the USSR. The values swing blithely from humane to anti-humane as glibly as ever: a plea for women's rights as human beings is followed by the jocular announcement of the bombing of an El Al plane.

In the spirit of collectivism, the picture has no credits. Yet, paradoxically, it's the Godard film in which he himself appears most often. So much for the anti-

cult of personality. On the whole, though, this is the best recent Godard film I've seen, on the simple negative ground that it's least boring. Again there is the sense that these post-*Weekend* (1967) methods are well suited to his temperament and that cartooning is best suited of all.

Why the feeling, then, that he's in exile? Certainly not because all his social criticisms are false. Godard would probably call my feeling (that he is exiled) the nostalgia in people like me for the traditions of bourgeois culture. True. But there is something more: there is regret. Regret that he has forsaken ambiguity for certainty. From the exile of that certainty, he sends us this latest defiant message.

Numéro deux, Jean-Luc Godard, 1975 (*The New Republic*, 1 & 8 August 1981)

And now for a different filmic view of commitment, love, sex, and contemporary pressures—naturally—from Jean-Luc Godard, along with a different way of presenting it. His latest American release was made before the Godard film last released here, *Every Man for Himself* (1980). The earlier one is called *Numéro deux* (*Number Two*): it was originally called *Numéro 2* (*À bout de souffle*). The connection with the original *À bout de souffle—Breathless* (1960)—is tenuous. Then why *Numéro deux*? Lots of guesses have been guessed, from the position of women in social hierarchy to the nursery bathroom term as an epithet for the world. The guess that makes most sense is that Godard felt he was starting a new career, but then why not *Numéro trois*? His second period, the Dziga Vertov Group, began in 1968. He moved to Grenoble in 1975, which is where and when he made this film; and it's not directly connected with the previous phase as far as I can see.

Whatever the title, this picture continues my latter-day experience with Godard. These days I get different rewards and tediums from his work, for at least two reasons: first, in the twenty years since my first Godard film, I've changed (I hope); second, the film world has certainly changed—has become significantly straitened, particularly in the last few years. Godard has become more valuable, even in the ways that he can get tiresome.

Much of *Numéro deux* was made on videotape. (Does this explain the title—a second technology?) In the opening shot Godard is standing next to a video machine, speaking to us, and at the same time we see his smaller image on the video screen, facing us. This goes on for a couple of minutes. I can't remember a great deal of what he said, but I remember the interesting double image. (Numéro deux?) Very often through the film, we see two images simultaneously, sometimes three. This isn't done with conventional split-screen. Godard uses, inset in the large black theater screen like photographs inset in a black mat, two or three television screens. Sometimes the concurrent images comment on each other, sometimes not; sometimes one or the other interior screen is blank or filled with TV "snow." One ineluctable point Godard is making is about the force-feeding of the electronic media—including what's being forced on you here.

From this non-sequential, formally varied film, a theme emerges. A young working-class couple, presumably in Grenoble, have two children; one set of grandparents also lives with them. (Grandpa is a former union official, a Communist.) The general intent is to show how political and economic conditions affect private life: to show that shutting the front door or, more particularly, the bedroom door doesn't shut out the world. Many of the images are sexually explicit

ones of the couple, and there are also clips from a porno film: all these are treated in ways that refrigerate them. Which is part of Godard's point.

The theme of prostitution has long been dominant in his work, with prostitution signifying everything from selling sexual access to one's body to selling one's time (therefore life) in an office job that one doesn't respect. Lately Godard's use of sex in sexual prostitution has become much more candid. His picture of housewives' afternoon whoring, *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), was a Sunday school feature compared with *Numéro deux*. The increased candor may mean more anger and more desperation in that anger.

For me, the changes in my view of Godard, pro and con, are made clearer by this film. I care less and less about what he says. The theme of the picture, the effect of public life on private life, is hardly new; and his portentous *obiter dicta*, on the soundtrack or printed on the screen, sound more and more like café wisdom. But his vision is not only not repetitive, not only not trite: it keeps ranging, testing, flying. I care very little for what Godard has said in his last two films—I don't think I could quote one complete line—but I care a good deal about what he has seen. In these days of billion-dollar special effects glitz, Godard is showing that the exploration of the two-dimensional black screen by imagination—not by billions—is still excitingly open.

***Stroszek*, Werner Herzog, 1977 (*The New Republic*, 20 & 27 August 1977)**

The latest film by the gifted Werner Herzog, *Stroszek*, continues one of his favorite themes: craziness in and of our world. His second feature, *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970), was about a revolt by dwarfs in an institution against the tyrannical director of the place, also a dwarf. The film was something like Vigo's *Zéro de conduite* (1933) as remade by Buñuel on a particularly manic day. *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) was about political madness in the Spanish *conquistadores*. *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) was about a nineteenth-century youth malformed from birth by the power drives of others and finally murdered by them. Stroszek is a young man, not quite competent mentally, who is battered by today's Germany and who immigrates to the United States with two other battered people— a young whore and a very old man—looking for refuge with the old man's American nephew in Wisconsin.

The picture splits in more than setting. The German half is a broodingly taut, if somewhat trite account of the bullying of the helpless Stroszek by two burly pimps because he has befriended their abused whore. Herzog handles this section easily, taciturnly. But strain runs through the American section. The ease is gone, and what we get is a collection of grotesque souvenirs. As with Wim Wenders' *Alice in the Cities* (1974), the tourist's notebook is figuratively out, for crudeness and rudeness. It's the *Zabriskie Point* (Antonioni, 1970) fallacy all over again. Also, in the American section Herzog relies a lot on improvisation and "stolen" footage, and much of it is clumsy. Worst, he manufactures the debacle at the end. Everything seems to be going O.K. in Wisconsin, then suddenly—just because Herzog needs it—everything goes wrong. He ends with very heavy symbolism: Stroszek circling aimlessly on a cable car while some conditioned chickens in an amusement arcade react repeatedly to repeated stimuli. This corn is far beneath

the best of Herzog.

Stroszek has touches of that best. For instance, Stroszek, in middle distance, his back to us, watches his American trailer-home being hauled away in the background because payments are overdue. He is stationary: the house he has been living in simply slides laterally out of the frame. It's a Keaton touch. And the cinematography by Herzog's usual teammate Thomas Mauch is exceptional. (Mauch also did the Alexander Kluge film *Strongman Ferdinand* [1976].)

As for the performances, I think that Bruno S., the real-life ex-derelict who was Kaspar Hauser, has reached the end of his film usefulness; but Eva Mattes, who plays the whore, ranges past what she showed as the homicidal fourteen-year-old in Fassbinder's *Jail Bait* (1973). This role doesn't have the emotional peaks of the Fassbinder film, but it calls for different colors, which Mattes supplies confidently.

So, less well in this instance, Herzog remains an artist working in Germany. In that maddening country—with some people trying to glorify the unspeakable past, some trying to refashion it, some trying to make the future different, some trying to make the future like the past—artists continue as an agonized voice: German, hating Germany *because* they are German and want to change the residence of their being and their love. For the time being, prominent among these artists are the filmmakers—like Werner Herzog and other members of the New German Cinema.

Where the Green Ants Dream, Werner Herzog, 1984 (*The New Republic*, 11 February 1985)

When a strong director makes a wretched picture, I wish it could just disappear. Werner Herzog is such a director, *Where the Green Ants Dream* such a picture. While I was watching it, I wished that the projector were like a tape recorder with the erase button pushed. If that sounds proprietary, it's Herzog who is to blame: he made me—and many thousands—partner in his projects, through such films as *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) and *Nosferatu* (1979) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). None of these films is even nearly flawless; all of them are wonderfully reckless adventures. They make me feel that I've traveled into several kinds of danger with an aesthetic explorer. The new one made me feel that I had been to a safe little do-gooder film directed by a man who had stolen Herzog's name.

The basic idea is *echt* Herzog: a conflict between intrusive civilization and Natural Man in a remote corner of the world. This time Herzog has journeyed to the interior of Australia, where a mining company is encroaching on the sacred lands of the aborigines, doing so with legal rights given them by a government of their fellows. The aborigines tacitly and stubbornly resist, even to the point of sitting in front of bulldozers with stoic disregard of danger. The mining company presses its legal case; the natives lose, of course. This land "where the green ants dream"—ants that, in the aboriginal belief, originate and continue life through their dreaming—is to be dug up. The ants are to be dislodged, their dreaming disrupted. We do not yet know the aftermath.

But the oppositions are too pat, and the very instance of confrontation is overly familiar. Excepting some of the aborigines, mysterious simply in their simple dignity, every aspect of the film is weak. Herzog's earlier films, erratic or

not, struck into several kinds of new territory. Here he seems not to know how often this Australian-whites-vs.-Australian-aborigines conflict has been used before, as social drama and as emblem. Nicolas Roeg, Peter Weir, and Fred Schepisi are only some of the directors who have made films on this theme. Worse, *Where the Green Ants Dream* gives not one image to compare with the visual marvels that Herzog has lavished on even his poorest previous work. It's as if he had left his visual acuity at home, even though he uses his customary cinematographer, Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein.

Worst, Herzog's script misses no chance for character cliché: an earnest, gangly young scientist who works for the company but whose heart is with the natives; a rough construction boss who wants to run right over the blacks; a company executive so blatantly wily that it's hard to believe he ever got to be an executive. Herzog has even rummaged in some old coffer of cinema picturesques and pulled out a little old lady who has lost her dog in the vast desert and is waiting for him under a parasol. Perhaps part of the script trouble comes from the fact that, apparently, Herzog wrote it in English. He speaks English fairly fluently; I've heard him at press conferences. People who speak a foreign language sometimes delude themselves into thinking they can write creatively in that language, then fall into snares that they would avoid on truly familiar ground.

The closest that the film comes to a real Herzog touch is with a two-motored plane, green because it's ex-military, which the aborigines request and which is given them as a grand sop. They don't want it for flying but as a totem of the green ants. Its fate is the closest to a valid symbol in the film.

Werner Herzog's new picture leaves me impatient for his next.

***Wise Blood*, John Huston, 1979 (*The New Republic*, 15 March 1980)**

John Huston's career has been eclectically ambitious, in an idle way. He has taken on a number of good books, of widely different varieties, and has wrestled some of them on to the screen successfully: *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *The African Queen* (1951), *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), and (a short story) *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975). On the other hand, he had no hesitation in tackling such numbers as *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), *Moby Dick* (1956), and, if you please, *The Bible* (1966), all of which failed. One of the better things to be said about him is that he has failed equally badly with dreck: *The Roots of Heaven* (1958), *The Barbarian and the Geisha* (1958), *The Unforgiven* (1960), *The List of Adrian Messenger* (1963), *Fat City* (1972). A middleweight, it would seem.

Except that he has also had his failures in the middle ranges as well. Two of them were Southern Grotesque in provenance if not in setting: Williams's *The Night of the Iguana* (1964) and McCullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967). (But note that, in the last, Brando gave one of his best and least appreciated performances.) Now it's Southern Grotesque time, and again Huston has fumbled.

Flannery O'Connor's 1952 novel *Wise Blood* is middling O'Connor, I think, far from the finest work by that often wonderful writer, but it's kept on a course of gravity, of taut contrast with a rational world and a healthy Christianity, by O'Connor's presence through her prose. The book is populated with distorted humans in baroque landscapes, but O'Connor's art manages, not easily, to keep it

an *agon* instead of a freak show.

Huston was apparently unaware of this. Likewise his screenwriter, Benedict Fitzgerald. When Éric Rohmer made *The Marquise of O . . .* (1976) he evidently knew that he had to situate his film in a technique of composition which would reproduce in pure cinema the medium of Kleist's prose. But no such need ever crossed the Huston-Fitzgerald minds. They thought that (near) fidelity to the story and the dialogue would in itself re-create the book.

It doesn't, of course. What we get are the data of the book: a chamber of horrors and a mass of unexplained behavior. A few flashbacks, with some glimpses of Huston himself as the preaching grandfather, do not explain Hazel Motes's anti-clerical religiosity. (And Brad Dourif in the role doesn't explain Hazel's power over women.) Instead of a mad Protestant Stephen Dedalus with the cursed Jesuit strain injected backward, this Hazel is only a horny and homicidal psychopath. O'Connor, in a note written ten years after the book was first published, called Hazel "a Christian *malgré lui*" and said the book was "a comic novel." Neither point is made here.

Huston's direction shows no special fluency or ease. Gerry Fisher's cinematography—the pallidness deliberate, I suppose—makes the factitiousness more so. O'Connor wanted to show us one lode of the resident evangelical strain in American history. But Huston's film shows us only a South of nutty religious con men and their gulls.

***Prizzi's Honor*, John Huston, 1985 (*The New Republic*, 8 July 1985)**

John Huston, now seventy-nine, is not noted for profound authenticity; but he never neglects the idea of suspense. He has tackled films derived from plenty of serious sources—Melville, McCullers, Williams, the Bible (!)—but his best ones have usually been the ones where he has had fun, has had the most success in having various kinds of fun: *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Across the Pacific* (1942), *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975), for examples.

So it was good news that he had moved from Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (which Huston filmed in 1984) to a gangster novel by Richard Condon. (Screenplay by Condon and Janet Roach.) Still, though it turns out to be a murder comedy with laughs that make you simultaneously shake your head, *Prizzi's Honor* is not top Huston fun.

Oh, he is still a very clever man. Who would have thought it possible to find a new angle at which to shoot furious sexual intercourse? Or to find a new way to show us a man getting a bullet in the head? Or to get laughs simply from insert shots of a transcontinental airplane flying either west or east? And he is fiendishly skillful in his use of his daughter, Anjelica, who looks like the finest bred mare in history, for satire and sex.

But *Prizzi's Honor* fumbles a bit before it sets its tone, and it is suffused with Mafia clichés. The aging don, head of the Brooklyn "family"—played by William Hickey, who wisely steers wide of anything like Brando—is now more a personage of ritual than of drama, exercising cruelty through the language of paternal care. The gang wars are old stuff and are not helped by the unlikely performances of John Randolph and Lee Richardson as the markedly un-Italian sons of the monkey-like old man.

To make matters worse, Jack Nicholson, as Randolph's son and a Mafia

soldier, gives such a designedly stupid performance that he's incredible as a crown prince, and he wallows so utterly in Brooklynese—with a paralyzed upper lip—that he sounds less acclimated to America than his father. And Kathleen Turner, supposedly Polish-American, as an independent contractor (of killings, naturally) is so flashily blond in conspicuous clothes that she would be identifiable around a corner in a heavy fog. Her profession as a "hitter" seems unlikely. The romance between her and Nicholson, which is emotionally hot at the same time that the plot makes them enemies, is reminiscent of the Sam Spade-Brigid O'Shaughessy tensions in *The Maltese Falcon*, here carried to glandular extremes.

If more questions had been asked of this script, and had been answered, it might have made a pretty good sexual comedy in a general moral sewer, a kind of laugh-and-lust counterpart of *Mikey and Nicky* (1976). As is, it coasts along pretty much on Huston's self-confidence and the fun he got out of making it. Unfortunately, this is more than we get out of watching it.

***The Match Factory Girl*, Aki Kaurismäki, 1989; *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, Aki Kaurismäki, 1989; and *I Hired a Contract Killer*, Aki Kaurismäki, 1990 (*The New Republic*, 12 November 1990)**

Reviewing Aki Kaurismäki's *Ariel* (1988) last August, a film that suddenly put Finland on the contemporary cinema map, I asked two questions. Do all Finns understand English? (We saw a Bogart clip being shown on Finnish TV without subtitles.) Do all Finns smoke a lot? (Cigarettes fumed furiously throughout.)

Matti Forss of Espoo, Finland, has kindly written to answer my questions. Most Finns, he says, do not understand English well enough to understand Bogart pictures; all films have Finnish and Swedish subtitles. (It's a bilingual country.) So this Bogart clip, we can assume, was just one more disregard of fact in a realistic fairy tale. As for the other query, Forss says every Finn does not smoke like the hero of *Ariel*. In fact, cigarette advertising is forbidden in Finland. Yet people do smoke—women more than men, youngsters more than grown-ups. Says Forss, "You explain that!"

I can't, but perhaps Kaurismäki can. Two of his subsequent films were shown at the recent New York Film Festival, and he appeared after the press screening to answer questions. Most of them were at the usual abysmal level. Kaurismäki, bottle of beer in hand, self-deprecatingly confident, handled them all quite well, often wittily, in adequate English. Someone asked why, in his films, ashes on cigarettes were allowed to get so long. He replied that in Finland people are so happy that they forget to watch their cigarettes and flick the ashes. A perfect press conference answer, I thought. I wish I had known then about Forss's quandary; I'd like to have heard Kaurismäki answer.

The two films shown at the festival, neither of which is yet announced for release in the United States, were *The Match Factory Girl* and *I Hired a Contract Killer*. The first, set in Helsinki, is about a teenaged girl who lives with her uncaring family, a slave of theirs and of the industrial system—she is on the soul-deadening assembly line of a match factory. One evening she meets a well-to-do young man in a bar and goes off with him. When she tries to see him again, he shunts her away. When she writes him that she is pregnant, he sends her a check for an abortion. She then buys rat poison, possibly thinking of suicide, but she decides to use it on

rats. Only those who are responsive to Kaurismäki's astringent style—a style that clings to naturalistic detail as it contradictorily spins fairy tales—will believe that this is a comedy. (The title itself echoes a previous fairy tale—Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Match Girl*.)

The other film is set in London and is spoken entirely in English, even by the leading man, Jean-Pierre Léaud, familiar from many Truffaut and Godard films. (Kaurismäki has said somewhere that he once played a small film part and imitated Léaud; his directorial debt to Godard—in nonchalance even more than in style—is patent.) Léaud is a clerk in the London Waterworks who is dismissed after fifteen years' service and despondently tries suicide. (Again!—again in a comedy.) He fails, then hires a contract killer to knock him off, falls in love, and tries to cancel the contract. This film, too, is done in a style that deals wittily—and, in plot terms, arbitrarily—with sordidness, a style that David Lynch has attempted less successfully.

In that press conference Kaurismäki, serious for a moment, said that a chief influence on him was Robert Bresson. Without overreading, this influence can be sensed in these two films—an untidy secular *Mouchette* (1967), a somewhat more untidy *Pickpocket* (1959). But the Bresson touch is much less apparent in *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*—made in 1989 like *The Match Factory Girl*—which is being shown here. (This is Kaurismäki's ninth feature in ten years. It's obviously impossible for him—at least at his present age—to do anything but buzz along breezily.)

Here the obvious household god is Jim Jarmusch, and lest there be any doubt, Jarmusch himself plays the small part of a secondhand car dealer. Everything about this picture is wildly, sometimes amusingly, unbelievable. A band of musicians, called the Leningrad Cowboys, all wear suits and ties and white shirts and wigs (supposed to be their own hair) of one huge lock combed forward like a unicorn's prong. They play an audition for a possible agent in a hut far above the Arctic Circle. The agent rejects them but gives them the address of another agent in New York.

They arrive in Manhattan, bringing their guitar player who was frozen stiff and is in a wooden box with his guitar sticking out through a hole. This agent gives them an address in Mexico where they can play a wedding. They buy a jalopy from Jarmusch, start south, have adventures—some of them on Jarmusch turf (Memphis)—play the Mexican date, and make a hit that leads to a future. It helps that, en route, the band has switched from corn to rock and the guitar player has thawed.

This is the first Kaurismäki film I've seen that tries overtly to be funny; in the others, the humor seeps through the seriousness. *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* isn't funny enough, though. Often, the joke stops somewhere up there on the screen and doesn't quite reach us. On the evidence so far, Kaurismäki has to be telling a somber tale wickedly, has in some degree to be mocking the very fact that he is telling a dark story, in order to amuse. But of prodigal, high-handed talent he has no lack. (And he has a filmmaking brother, Mika, whose work hasn't yet been shown in the U.S.)

***Naked*, Mike Leigh, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 3 January 1994)**

Godard's *Breathless* (1960) begins with car theft and murder; and in the last sequence the protagonist runs down the middle of a street. Mike Leigh's *Naked* begins with rape—or at least sex turned very nasty—and a car theft; and it ends with the protagonist limping down the middle of a street. What happens in between is Leigh's own, but if Godard were Leigh's age and British, he might well have made this picture. The insouciance toward plot, the chance encounters along the way that are explored in great detail and then sharply dropped—these, too, are reminders of Godard.

The first Leigh film I saw was *High Hopes* (1988), also quasi-Godardian, which dealt with proud casualness among anti-Thatcher dropouts in London. Then came *Life Is Sweet* (1990), revolving around a restaurant, which was a disappointment, confected. He's back in casual stride again with *Naked* as he tells the non-tale of Johnny, a bright and dedicatedly grungy young man who steals a car in Manchester, drives to London, looks up Louise, a friend from Manchester, sleeps with her roommate because Louise isn't there at the moment, and moves in for a while.

He floats around London for one night, meeting a young Scottish couple whose Glasgow speech we can't understand, a philosophic night watchman, an older woman whose offer of sex he declines because she resembles his mother, a waitress who invites him home and then declines him. Something of a counterpoint to Johnny's narrative is that of Sebastian, a rich young sadist who owns the house that Louise is subletting and who shows up to collect sexually. The fact that sleek Sebastian is not much more sadistic than anomic Johnny suggests that the ruling genius here isn't Émile Durkheim but Andrea Dworkin.

The film leans heavily in favor of dropping out, which gives it a slightly sentimental, dated feeling. We're asked to share the '60s view that those who do nothing are of greater purity than those who may be trying to do something useful. Johnny is an inquirer who lives on the hope that he won't find answers, scrounging along in several ways, shrugging himself free of emotion and commitment. Which attitude, at this late date, is supposed to make him especially interesting.

David Thewlis's performance helps, however. Lesley Sharp, as the girl from Manchester, and Katrin Cartlidge, as her housemate, are taking. One of Leigh's anti-conventions is to use women who are not pretty. This ploy succeeds in a wry way: the more we know these women, the prettier they become.

Leigh works with his actors for months before shooting, asking them to improvise on scenes he has planned. Then the improvised dialogue is written down, organized, polished. It's a method that was used by Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater and other groups. In Leigh's film it leads to a certain springiness in the talk.

***Career Girls*, Mike Leigh, 1997 (*The New Republic*, 25 August 1997)**

For the English writer-director Mike Leigh, realism has a special meaning and a special danger. Leigh is notable as a director who works intensely with his actors, sometimes for months before shooting, to fuse actor and role and encourage improvisation. His whole drive is to do everything with more untrammeled verity than is common in films. This approach can result in such exceptional films as *High Hopes* (1988) and *Secrets and Lies* (1996). It can also result in such films as *Naked* (1993) and his latest, *Career Girls*, in which the ultra-

realism is used for not much more purpose than to be ultra-realistic.

Career Girls braids two timelines. It begins with Annie, in her mid-twenties, on a train to London where she meets Hannah, about her own age. In the other line we meet Annie and Hannah when they were late teenagers living together, with another girl, in London. The re-meeting of the two, for the first time in six years, plays against what they were like when they first knew each other.

The texture of each strand seems, as far as a male American can judge, exact. Earlier, Hannah was cocky and snappy, aggressive because she was just a bit frightened. The provincial Annie, just arrived—with a bad case of dermatitis—is numbed a bit with excitement and timidity. Nowadays the older Hannah has transmuted her hip-hop aggression into a fair simulacrum of urban sophistication. Annie, clear-skinned and controlled, brings to the reunion a touch more sentiment than it deserves. Leigh attempts to "serious" things up in a manner he has used before—with a mentally impaired character. A young abnormal man, who is in both time strands, seems to be present merely as a reproof to the two girls/women for not having more empathy, for being so self-centered. The presence of this man seems more facile, on Leigh's part, than seriously disturbing.

Before very long, and while admiring the unvarnished texture of the film, we begin to wonder why we are looking at and listening to this material. Essentially it's the stuff of many American films and some TV shows—*cinéma vérité* that goes nowhere except to contemplate its own unadorned navel. Neither of the time strands is in itself particularly interesting, and the juxtaposition of both strands reveals very little that couldn't have been predicted.

The one sparkling asset of the film is Katrin Cartlidge, as Hannah. Cartlidge was in *Naked* and did well; she did even better as Emily Watson's patient, mature sister-in-law in *Breaking the Waves* (1996). Here, as the younger Hannah, she performs a performing character: the syncopated, superficially knowledgeable, tinselly teenager whose protection against the impinging world is to be a stand-up comic sans microphone. In the older Hannah we see that act transmuted into sheen. The older Hannah's self, not her body, seems clothed in Spandex. Lynda Steadman, as the two Annies, has less showy parts but makes them discreetly sweet.

Like many another genuine innovator, Leigh can get so immersed in the making of a film that he takes its creation as its reason for being. But we aren't present at the creation, fascinating as it may have been. We have only the result, which this time is not enough.

Poor Cow, Ken Loach, 1967 (*The New Republic*, 10 February 1968)

The second shot in *Poor Cow* is of the heroine's vagina—at least it is supposed to be hers. The first shot is of her face on the hospital delivery table as she takes a whiff of gas; the second is of the birth itself. Thus, in key with the title, her bovinity is immediately established. She is a creature destined to service males and bear offspring.

This birth shot is by no means a "first" in films. (One predecessor: Jean Gabin's natural-childbirth picture, *The Case of Dr. Laurent*, from 1957.) Both this lack of novelty and this desire to shock with Truth typify the whole film. In one way *Poor Cow* resembles Marco Bellocchio's recent *China Is Near* (1967): new

techniques have been applied to traditional material. But Bellocchio's material triumphs over his method. Here the material is finally unrewarding, and we end up just watching the new techniques go somersaulting by.

That material is our old friend, the naturalistic scrutiny of the life of the poor, as developed in continental literature during the nineteenth century and imported into England around 1900 by such writers as Somerset Maugham (*Liza of Lambeth*) and Arthur Morrison (*A Child of the Jago*). Joy is a working-class girl in postwar London who gets pregnant at eighteen and is married to the child's father, a young thief. She treats his job simply as a job. When he is caught and jailed, she falls in love with another thief, Dave, who too is eventually caught and sentenced to twelve years. Lonely and bored with her pub job, Joy sleeps with various men. Her husband, whom she is divorcing, is released from prison and gets her to come back to him. She is unhappy with him. She really loves Dave, who has many years to serve. The film ends with Joy still fairly confident about her future, trying to get clear of her husband, hoping some day to be happy with Dave and in the interim to avoid prostitution.

The screenplay was written by Nell Dunn, who wrote the recently published novel on which it is based, and by Ken Loach, who directed the film. Loach is a young Englishman, fresh out of television and also, I guess, fresh out of every art-movie house in London. His style, applied to this old-fashioned material, is straight imitation Godard. Godard's influence seems to be the starting point for many young directors around the world—in Italy, Bellocchio; in Poland, Jerzy Skolimowski (*Le départ* [*The Departure*, 1967] and *Barrier* [1966]); in Germany, Alexander Kluge (*Yesterday Girl* [1966])—but most of these directors manage to give the influence a touch of themselves. Loach apes: the ferociously elliptical cutting, the handheld camera, the "chapter" titles (originally out of Brecht), the shots "stolen" in the streets. The film even closes with a Godardian interview as Joy answers an unseen questioner. The last shot is that new cliché, already ancient, the freeze frame.

We are told these days—and only in the world of film criticism would it be considered news—that the era of the plot is over, that dramatic narrative is giving way to "essay" or exploration. *Poor Cow* is of mixed breed: it makes some moves toward story in the early part, but the later part settles down mostly into exploration—of milieu and character—and that later part has considerable dullness in it because what it explores is generally trite. The milieu is by now very familiar, and there is little about this girl herself that isn't apparent quite early, when "story" is still in progress. When the story fades, so does interest. There are some good sequences, like the one in which Joy and another girl do some quasi-nude modeling for a lecherous camera club, and her love for her baby son runs through the dawdling film like a clear persistent stream. But in herself Joy is not rich enough—in range or depth—to sustain a film that depends on her richness, rather than on events.

At the base, then, of all the film's superficial modern vitality, is dull-wittedness: about the material and the method. The writers have not given us any new illumination of the forces that made Joy a cow, or even a new emotional use of familiar materials; and the director's style is so slavish that we can almost feel Loach perspiring in fear that he has left out one Godardian device. For Joy a new actress named Carol White has been found, presumably as competition for Julie Christie, which she is not, either in looks or personality. The only attractive

performance is by Terence Stamp as Dave—gentle, affectionate, resigned. There is Technicolor. There are some songs by Donovan, and there are some old-fashioned songs. The former are supposed to be deft comment, because they are mod; the latter are supposed to comment satirically because they are corny. But *both* uses—by now—seem corny.

Raining Stones, Ken Loach, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 28 March 1994)

Ken Loach, the celebrant of the English working class, used subtitles in his last film, *Riff-Raff* (1991), to help us with the arcane speech of the people in the story. Why didn't Loach retain that simple, useful device for his latest? *Raining Stones*, set in northern England, is incomprehensible half the time. And yet . . .

The shape of the story is so lucid that watching the film is, much of the time, like watching an opera performance in a foreign language: if we've read a synopsis, we're all right. With Loach, we don't need a synopsis because we can understand half and fill in the rest. Obviously, as subtitled operas on television prove, it's immeasurably better to know the smallest details; and obviously (I hope) I'm not arguing for semi-incomprehensibility. Still, *Raining Stones* is a teaser. I can't even explain the title: someone says something about "raining stones seven days a week," and I couldn't get the rest of the remark. Yet the selves and the quandaries of the principal people are so vivid that the picture holds.

Bob, a workingman with wife and child, is unemployed. He and his friend Tommy are city folk, but we first see them out on the moors stealing a sheep, which they then sell to a butcher in town for disappointing money. While Bob is trying to peddle some of the mutton, his van is stolen. He must have a van to get about and find work, so he borrows money from loan sharks to buy another. He doesn't find work and can't keep up the loan payments. The sharks are criminals; they move in on Bob, heavily.

What keeps us watching this unsurprising story are the characters and the texture of their lives—in their homes, their pubs, their (Catholic) church. Loach is clearly more interested in people than in stories: he just wants enough story, as supplied by Jim Allen's screenplay, to keep his characters in motion. Conditions, circumstances, the possibilities of reasonable hope—for people with limited access to hope—these are Loach's prime concerns.

And they would be enough, in hands like his, but Loach insures our interest with humor. Tommy, Bob's friend, played with helplessness and ingenuity by Ricky Tomlinson (who was in *Riff-Raff*), accompanies him pretty much throughout, chubby, ebullient, in the same sea of troubles as Bob but using jokes as water wings. Presumably Loach put a lot of local people in small roles. Even his leading actors, though good, are not really professionals: they've done some acting here and there. He seems to take his approach from the Italian neorealists of the postwar years, and it's crystallized by the confidence he obviously inspires in his people and the unobtrusive deftness with which he films them.

It's odd to be recommending a picture that can't be entirely understood, but Bob and friends are so engaging that we soon begin to feel it's our fault for not understanding them. (Still, I hope that someone subtitles this film some day.)

Ladybird, Ladybird, Ken Loach, 1994 (*The New Republic*, 12 December 1994)

The short and simple annals of the poor, in Ken Loach's hands, become full-bodied and complex. His latest film, *Ladybird, Ladybird*, is in the line of such Loach works as *Raining Stones* (1993) and *Riff-Raff* (1991), a closer look at the lives and incidents in those newspaper pages that we turn as we get to what really interests us. By now we are all—in Britain and America—comfily satisfied with the difference between the conditions of poor people a hundred years ago and today; it takes a jolt to remind us that indoor plumbing doesn't eradicate all economic problems and personal anguish.

Loach jolts. But a key tone of his films, which makes them more affecting, is that he doesn't deal in pity: he deals in lives. The people in the past two films and this one simply handle what they have to handle, as best as they can. They do not see themselves as an underclass: it's we who, if we will, supply that context. They are too busy getting on with it.

Ladybird, Ladybird is set in East London and is (yet again) based on a true story, which is verified by the closing titles. Maggie is a pub singer, in her thirties, who has had four children by four different men. All four children have been taken away from her by social services, which is an agony to her—she adores them. We get some of her past life, including her own horrid, sexually abused childhood, when she meets Jorge, a Paraguayan political exile, responds to his gentleness, and confides in him about her four children. He in turn responds to her deep feeling, her travails, and, to be sure, her sexuality. Maggie and Jorge begin to live together. He supports them with a restaurant job for which he is underpaid because he overstays his visit and becomes "illegal."

In time they have a daughter, and we see firsthand that Maggie is a doting, warm mother. We know, too, from those flashbacks and from new experiences with social services people, that she is scarily short-fused, explosive. When any difficulties arise, either with social officers or anyone else, she goes wild. This instability, plus her financial state and the fact that she isn't married, causes the government to take her daughter away. Maggie's subsequent stormy behavior at the court hearing only confirms the government action. And this happens again when she has another daughter with Jorge.

He, loyal, patient, perceptive, stays with her—not without some troubled moments, but steadfast. And a closing title tells us that the real Maggie and Jorge have had three more children, whom they have been allowed to keep. But that closing title only increases an uncertainty about the film. As it progresses, we are less and less sure of Loach's focus. Certainly his central character Maggie has all his sympathy, but she also has all his truth. And she is shown to be such a volatile, quickly violent person that it's difficult to argue with the social-service decisions. Those services are shown to be imperfect; Maggie is shown to be devotedly maternal. But who among us can think it ruthless of social welfare to worry about children in the care of this neurotic woman? The fact that her neurosis is explicable doesn't help.

Then there are the three post-film children. What happened to Maggie and her circumstances with Jorge to change the government's view of her fitness? Loach saith not. If we are meant to take Maggie's side throughout, Loach has made this difficult with his very honesty. He may have started out to make a film about the cold cruelty of child welfare, but then, by refusing to load the dice, he created not an argument but a dilemma.

In any case his treatment of the material is in his best style—a combination

of documentary candor, technical deftness, and sympathetic directing of actors. As Jorge, a Chilean musician named Vladimir Vega soon triumphs over his lack of physical appeal with his tenderness of spirit. (This is *echt* Loach: to take a seemingly unattractive person and let him win us with his being. Thus implicitly Loach criticizes the priorities of most film casting.) Maggie is played by Crissy Rock, who is a stand-up comic in her native Liverpool. Loach led her into territories of pathos and rage that, quite possibly, she didn't know she owned.

***Land and Freedom*, Ken Loach, 1995 (*The New Republic*, 1 April 1996)**

Ken Loach, that invaluable Englishman who made *Riff-Raff* (1991), *Raining Stones* (1993), and *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994), has perfected a style that might be called neorealism updated. Loach is as concerned with the harshness of social reality and the tenderness under it as ever Rossellini and De Sica were, but he leavens the mix with more professional actors than the pure neorealists used in their work. They wanted film to find the truth in "mere" people: Loach thinks that the right actors need not interfere with the search for truth—they can in fact illuminate it. He isn't therefore superior to his predecessors, but he certainly proves his right to his views.

His views make his latest film, *Land and Freedom*, just as finely fashioned as the ones cited above. In texture and urgency it never wavers. But it does leave us wondering about its being as a whole. *Land and Freedom* is about the Spanish Civil War as seen by Dave Hart, an English working man and a communist, who volunteers to fight in Spain in 1936; but the picture begins with his death in Liverpool today.

In Jim Allen's screenplay, Dave's granddaughter goes through his letters and clippings and photos, and the film flashes back to his experiences in Spain: his combat life, his encounters with the communist factionalism that accompanies the fight against fascism, his involvement in the ponderous discussion groups, his love affair with a young woman in the ranks alongside him, and the dreadful inevitable results of the war—inevitable not only because Italy and Germany were supporting Franco, not only because the democracies were reluctant to support communists, but because of the strife among anti-Franco forces and the subversions of Stalin.

For those of us who lived through those days, Loach re-creates engulfingly the atmosphere in which we lived and feared. Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 had been naked brutality. Still, it seemed somewhat distant. Franco's rebellion in Spain seemed to presage the tidal roll of fascism toward us. Loach made me remember nightmares (and my two heroic days when I got an application form for the Abraham Lincoln Battalion and studied it, then never filled it out).

World War II and subsequent events erased the simplistic dualism of fascism vs. communism—but apparently not for Loach. As Dave Hart's body is lowered into his Liverpool grave, his relatives and friends, young and old, raise their fists in the communist salute. It's not knee-jerk anti-communism, I think, to wonder—after that salute—about the purpose of the film. Is Loach sympathizing or satirizing? Is he telling us that Dave—and perhaps he himself—learned nothing from the slitherings of communist policy in the Spanish Civil War, let alone the cascade of subsequent history? In recent years, even deeply held radical beliefs

have come in for darker tempering; we get no sense of that from Loach's excellently made but ideationally puzzling film.

Zazie (*in the Metro*), Louis Malle, 1960 (*The New Republic*, 18 December 1961)

A new French movie, *Zazie (in the Metro)*, attempts to reproduce a novel. Raymond Queneau's recent book is a piece of sometimes funny *bizarrerie* about an uninhibited eleven-year-old girl brought to Paris for a weekend by her mother, who is then busy with a lover and leaves the child with an uncle—a nightclub female impersonator. The child proceeds to raise hell among a group of people who are far from staid citizens.

The film was directed by Louis Malle, who made *The Lovers* (1958), which, though foolish, showed flair; and *Frantic* (a.k.a. *Elevator to the Gallows*, 1957), a commonplace thriller. In *Zazie* Malle has not tried to duplicate Queneau's barmy style; he has tried to find its cinematic equivalent. What he has chosen is silent-film comedy, so we get an anthology of gags from Buster Keaton, Harry Langdon, Harold Lloyd, *et al.* Example: A chases B; they run behind a billboard; when they emerge, B is chasing A. But in the old comedies all the foofaraw was to some plot purpose, however thin; here there is none, just a long collection of gags that, because they exist in a vacuum, soon become tiresome. Worse, a feeling of coterie preciousness envelops the film. One can almost hear the voices of Malle's friends cooing on the soundtrack: "Oh, Louis, how delicious!"

Murmur of the Heart, Louis Malle, 1971 (*The New Republic*, 13 November 1971)

Louis Malle, one of the first of the French New Wave, is a gifted fumbler. He moves in interesting directions but always mucks up. In *Zazie* (1960) he fiddled with surrealist jump-cutting and fumbled. In *The Fire Within* (1963) he aspired *à la* Camus and fumbled. In *Viva Maria!* (1965) he tried a picaresque sexy romance, fumbled again, and we won't even talk about his Poe episode in the anthology film *Spirits of the Dead* (1968). Now comes *Murmur of the Heart.* He directed it well, but the script, which he wrote, is the epitome of a mediocre writer's idea of sensitivity and daring. So . . . another fumble.

It's the story of how a boy, not quite fifteen, gets to make love with his mother. From the very beginning, signals are flashed—blindingly. Mama, who is lovely and relatively young, runs around in her slip before him and his older teenaged brothers. More, she is foreign—an Italian in a French family—thus the "different" person needed for a "different" action. More, the boy is highly intelligent, so he is "different," too. More, they are well-to-do, so they live in an atmosphere of culture and off-hand taste and easy *tristesse*. What hack writer, up from some scriptwriting cellar, would not have made a beeline for all these elements if asked for a script in which incest could be made acceptable? (Ask a social worker about the kind of home in which incest is most likely to occur.)

Malle doesn't leave the triteness there. When the boy mentions masturbation in confession, the priest—as if on cue from three centuries of anti-clerical literature—reaches forward and feels him up. When the boy goes to bed

with his first whore and tries to kiss her, she tells him—guess!—that she doesn't kiss her customers; she saves that for her fiancé. Even the final "snapper" sequence, after the sex with his ma, is debased Colette. Malle, to put it kindly, is malleable.

Benoît Ferreux is attractive as the boy in an angular, broody, witty way. The best pleasure in the picture is Lea Massari as the mother. She was the girl who disappeared early in *L'Avventura* (1960) and has virtually disappeared from all films since then—on American screens, at least. She's warm, credibly free-spirited, wonderfully funny-looking, and wonderfully sexy. Now that she's back from that island, I hope she'll stick around. The real argument against this film is not its corny sensitivities but its purposelessness. The good works about incest, of various kinds, have used the subject significantly. But the whole point of this picture is simply to go on long enough and tremulously enough so that the incest scene is "tasteful" when it arrives. Suppose it is. Why bother?

***Au Revoir les Enfants*, Louis Malle, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 22 February 1988)**

Louis Malle keeps trying to set up shop as a front-rank director. If he doesn't make it in one neighborhood, he hangs out his shingle in another. Some of his neighborhoods have been: the New Wave (*The Lovers*, 1958); documentary (*Phantom India*, a.k.a. *Calcutta*, 1969); nostalgic Americana (*Atlantic City*, 1981); "meaningful" erotica (*Murmur of the Heart*, 1971; *Pretty Baby*, 1978); and German-occupied France (*Lacombe, Lucien*, 1974). Other directors have wandered around in subject and place, conveying a sense of curiosity and growth (Ford, Huston, Welles); with Malle, the feeling is less adventure than adventurism, a need to move on because he can't really dig in.

Now, after *My Dinner with André* (1981), a modest artistic success because Malle directed modestly, after *Crackers* (1984), a disastrous American comedy, Malle returns to a milieu he hasn't visited since 1974 with *Lacombe, Lucien*—occupied France; and he makes a better film than he did the last time he was in this territory. *Au Revoir les Enfants* (*Goodbye, Children*), as he tells us in a brief, spoken epilogue, is autobiographical, an experience that has been pressing on his mind since he was a schoolboy in 1943-44.

Malle (he gives himself another name in the film) was eleven, at a Catholic boarding school near Fontainebleau. One day a new boy, called Bonnet, is brought in by the priest who heads the school. The new boy undergoes the usual hazings and cruelties through which children vent their resentment of their elders on peers. It's soon clear that Bonnet is temperamentally withdrawn, somewhat brighter than the others, and close-mouthed about his family background. We sense the truth about him fairly quickly, because of the period and the occasional appearances of German troops and French-Nazi militia; but it's quite right that we should sense it before Bonnet's companions, first, because they are children and second, because they are engulfed in the circumstance and we are observing it.

At last, acting on a tip from a kitchen employee, a Gestapo agent appears, hunting out the Jewish boys hidden in the school. In Malle's class occurs the event that, understandably, he has never been able to forget. The agent asks the Jewish boy to reveal himself. Malle, who has some time before learned Bonnet's real name (Kippelstein), inadvertently glances at the Jewish boy. The Gestapo man pounces

on Bonnet. Then he finds two other Jewish boys elsewhere in the school and takes them off along with the priest-principal. Before he leaves, Bonnet forgives Malle, saying that he would have been discovered anyway. But Malle hasn't forgiven himself. He tells us that the destination of the arrested boys was Auschwitz.

Unlike *Lacombe, Lucien*, the new film has no heavy touches to enlist our sympathies. (It has one resemblance to the earlier film: the Gestapo's informant is a loutish youth, a kitchen helper who is discharged and gets his revenge by informing the Germans. Also, some shots are reminiscent of Jean Vigo's *Zéro de conduite* [1933]; but how could they be avoided in a film set in a French boarding school?) Still, with no sins of commission, *Au Revoir les Enfants* falters on the side of omission. It never evokes much more than what can be called the inherent emotion of its subject. No film about people under the Nazis, let alone children, let alone Jewish children, can be devoid of tensions. But Malle doesn't go much beyond or beneath the given tensions: on the contrary, he seems to rely on them to establish and maintain his film.

What was so deeply scored in his memory would, he apparently believed, carry its own weight. This resulted in a restraint on Malle's part that is unusual and welcome, but it also resulted in—harsh word though it is—superficiality. The roles of "Malle" and Bonnet are not well or deeply developed. Besides, the two young actors are neither talented nor appealing, and Malle shows no special gifts in handling children. The boys are never false, but they never become more than stock figures: the safe boy who doesn't mean to betray, the Jewish boy who is slowly but surely doomed.

The boarding-school setting forces an unfair comparison. If the life span of Vigo had been different and he had been through the experience of the young Malle, the result would likely have been a film that went beyond a lucid chronicle of the facts, ghastly as they were, to a bitter poem of ingrained cruelty.

***Oblomov*, Nikita Mikhalkov, 1979 (*The New Republic*, 21 March 1981)**

One surprise about *Oblomov* is that, as far as I can tell, it has never been filmed before. The name of the protagonist, as well as the generic "Oblomovism," has passed into several languages, yet this new Soviet picture is the first based on the book. A second surprise is that it's a good film: surprising chiefly because the previous work I've seen by Nikita Mikhalkov, the director—*A Slave of Love* (1976)—was blatantly prettified. *Oblomov* isn't free of director's intrusions, but on the whole it's a moving, atmospherically authentic distillation of a great, highly significant novel. One byproduct of the picture's arrival may be to turn people to Goncharov's book; everyone knows his and its name, but many have it on their Must Read Some Time list.

Our hero—a ridiculous use of the term if ever there was one—is in his early thirties and lives in St. Petersburg in the 1850s on the income of a badly run estate, which he rarely visits. What Oblomov does mostly is sleep. Or at least lie down. In his large, dowdy apartment, attended by a manservant, he reclines in his bed or on his sofa, calls for what he wants, grumbles when he gets it, overeats, and resists the efforts of friends to activate him.

But if that were all, Oblomov (accent his name on the second syllable)

would be only a Gogol cartoon out of *The Inspector General*. What makes the novel as important as it is good is that it's one of the early appearances in European literature of the dramatic power of disaffection. It had been preceded by Musset's *Fantasio* and Büchner's *Leonce and Lena.* Russian critics have pointed out the connection with Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and the hero of Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time*. What about Turgenev's *Diary of a Superfluous Man*? What about—ineluctably—Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*?

Why then did the USSR decide to make a film on this theme—from a novel supremely embodying this theme? The answer may lie in the attitude that Soviet theaters often take toward Chekhov: that the plays describe a past lassitude and are therefore cautionary tales. This misguided belief about Chekhov *and* the Soviet present may be the ill wind that has blown to this film's good. Besides, the screenplay by Mikhalkov and Aleksander Adabashyan rearranges the material somewhat: the script begins with Oblomov as a small boy, cosseted by mommy on the country estate, and there are flashbacks throughout to this pampered boyhood. Possibly we are to infer that he was the spoiled scion of wealthy bourgeoisie; and that the encouragement of idleness leads, inevitably, to the sofa, literally or figuratively. Outside the Soviet paradigm, however, *Oblomov* poses less soluble questions.

As in the novel, the film is not simply about a man who won't get up and busy himself: it's about why he won't. He is convinced that any activity by him, any existence by him, doesn't much matter in the cosmic scheme—in fact, that there isn't much of a cosmic scheme. His life is futile and therefore may as well be unobtrusive to others and pleasant to himself. The one possibility for his life to be altered galvanically is his love for the young and beautiful Olga. It looks as if that love may be fulfilled: but the complications of self-doubt cede her to Oblomov's close friend, Stolz. (Another of those partly German Russians of the nineteenth century, like Tusenbach in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.) Oblomov sinks back into lethargy, eventually marries his housekeeper, has a son, and dies—rather, disappears *completely*. With an echo of the opening, the film ends with his little son running across fields to greet his mother. (Oddly, the child seems to run well over a mile—just to sustain the final image.) The inescapable implication is that Oblomov *fils* is headed eventually for the Oblomov sofa.

This isn't the emphasis of the book, though its sources are in Goncharov; still the film has lovely flavor and nicely muted poignancy. When Mikhalkov relaxes, when he isn't fretting to be visually inventive by moving the camera in or out without necessity, when he isn't searching for an odd angle—in short, when he relies on his actors and his story—the picture holds well. Occasionally he can put invention really at the service of the story. Near the end, in the Stolz home, there's a shot with Stolz at his desk in another room, left background; his wife, Olga, sewing in a close room, foreground; and an old friend in the room with her, right background. The triangle, involving two rooms, fixes an old relationship by means of the arrangement of space.

As in all Soviet films, the color ranges from the dull to the insufficiently clarified to the gorgeous. The music is good; early on, Olga, an amateur singer, does *Norma*'s "Casta diva" after dinner, and it finds its way onto the soundtrack as a binding theme.

Elena Solovei, who was the heroine of *A Slave of Love*, is Olga, winning and puzzled and vulnerable—much more appealing than she was in the earlier film.

Yuri Bogatyryev is staunch and generous as Stolz, a friend in the full nineteenth-century sense. Inevitably the picture depends on Oblomov, and Oleg Tabakov is excellent. He gets the prosaic but real yearning, the insufficient confidence without silliness, the pudgy but delicate dignity that make him withdraw from what Robert Penn Warren calls the "slur of the world's weather." *Oblomov* had to wait surprisingly long for filming: now that the film is here, it will remain.

***Dark Eyes*, Nikita Mikhalkov, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 12 October 1987)**

Dark Eyes opens daringly. We are in the empty dining room of a *luxe* Italian ship, around 1915. In comes a thirsty man who is told that he is early: they aren't serving yet. Another man, writing at a table, invites the newcomer to join him and share his pitcher of wine. The newcomer, played by Vsevolod Larionov, and the man with the wine, Marcello Mastroianni, converse in Italian. Mastroianni recognizes the first man's Russian accent, and this opens the floodgates of memory in his own mind. Mastroianni begins to tell a story. This story is the film, and the film itself frequently reverts to its telling at this table.

The daring in that first six or seven minutes is that nothing happens except the conversation of the two men. The director, Nikita Mikhalkov, does what Ingmar Bergman occasionally did—he throws the burden of his opening on his actors. Mikhalkov emphasizes this by using close-ups throughout the scene. "These are two interesting characters," he seems to say. "More, they are played by two actors in themselves interesting. I bet on them." He wins. Mastroianni and Larionov capture us with their savory interplay.

But that is the best scene in the film, the one most sensitively and economically realized. Much in the rest of the film is gorgeous, but a good deal of it is too gorgeous. Some of the performances are cleanly drawn, some are hammy. Mastroianni himself gets thinner and thinner as the film progresses. The screenplay begins with a nugget of promise, then wastes that promise as it goes.

Dark Eyes is an Italian-Soviet co-production and was shot in both countries. Mastroianni, we're told, was enchanted by such Mikhalkov films as *A Slave of Love* (1976) and *Oblomov* (1979). He pressed his producer, Silvia D'Amico Bendico, to approach Mikhalkov, and after much conferring, this film was arranged and made. The screenplay was written by Mikhalkov with a Russian collaborator, Alexander Adabashyan, and an Italian, Suso Cecchi D'Amico. (D'Amico, who has worked on many of the best Italian films of the last forty years, is the mother of the producer.) It was based on some Chekhov stories, principally "The Lady with the Dog," and there begins the trouble.

Those who know the story, or the lovely Soviet film of it by Josef Heifetz (1959), will wonder why it was substantively altered. Those who don't know the story won't be aware of what they are missing or why. In the original, a Muscovite, married to a wealthy woman, vacations in Yalta and has a brief affair—he thinks—with the vacationing wife of a provincial official. They part. The man, back in Moscow, belatedly realizes that he has fallen in love, travels to the woman's provincial home, and finds that the same is true of her. Their tragedy, of thwarted love, begins. (The English literary critic John Bayley, with pardonable excess, recently called it the greatest short story ever written.)

The screenplay naturally makes the man an Italian. He is bored with his rich wife, is unfaithful, and goes to the spa of Montecatini, where he meets a young

Russian married woman. They have an affair. Subsequently he pursues her to Russia and finds that she is as much in love as he. He leaves, saying that he will free himself and return, but he doesn't. Some of the alterations don't much hurt the Chekhov story, but the ending reduces tragedy to pathos—or would do so if it succeeded. The film's last moments consist of two twists that I mustn't reveal; the mere fact that there *are* twists is proof of debasement. The fundamental damage is to the man's character. He is made a lecherous buffoon, a stupid idler, incapable of the change of feeling we are told he undergoes.

The screenplay (which includes nods to Cicero and Tolstoy) further bogs down with changes of tone, particularly some fake Gogol scenes with Russian officials, quite divorced from the realistic level of most of the film. And in the provincial Russian town a sequence is inserted with a local vet who wants to save forests, for no other reason apparently than to remind us of Dr. Astrov in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*.

The inadequate writing of the leading role is italicized by Mastroianni's performance. In a way he has himself become the character he plays here—a rich idler, supported by a wealthy wife (the film industry), who doesn't really work at acting anymore: he just dallies with what comes along. If he had played the character to the hilt, he might have vitalized even this misconceived role and thus bound the film together. But in virtually the whole picture he moves and listens and responds as if he had been wakened out of the star's easy chair to do a scene. The marvelous actor of *The Organizer* (1963) and *La Notte* (1961) and *8½* (1963), even of the recent Brazilian *Gabriela* (1983), is here encased in protective superficialities, facile signals of emotion and concern remembered from past performances.

The mention of *8½* is additionally bitter because some of the sequences at the spa mimic Fellini's parodic touches at his spa. Anyone who makes a film at an elegant spa runs the risk of comparison with Fellini; certainly aware of this, Mikhalkov takes that risk and falters. He is neither inventive nor serious enough to do successful satire. Throughout the picture he merely hungers for artistic effect.

The camerawork by Franco di Giacomo is sometimes oddly muted— the sky is often gray on sunny days, the trees and grass almost brown, though Mikhalkov wants lushness. He can use camera motion well, following persistently; he can "dress" a scene well with an incidental passerby. But he zooms in and out excessively, and he wallows in capital-B Beauty—vistas of wind-swept Russian streets, long shots of a wagon rolling across a vast Russian meadow. Mikhalkov also lays on acting-class trickery. When the lovers meet again in Russia, Mikhalkov has Mastroianni pursue the frightened woman while she carries a tray with rattling glasses; then the man takes the tray and the glasses rattle some more. When he corners her in a barn, they kiss as chicken feathers descend around them. This cheapness is further cheapened by Francis Lai's score.

The Russian wife is played wistfully, therefore rightly, by Elena Safonova, who has something of the effect of the cognate actress in the Heifetz film: at first she seems a ninny, but she becomes a ninny with a sorrow. Safonova changes much more affectingly than Mastroianni. The long-absent Silvana Mangano is sympathetic as the rich Italian wife. The underrated Marthe Keller is perfect as Mastroianni's ex-mistress and friend, with just the right blend of affection for him and amusement at her affection.

Various Russian actors, including the renowned Innokenti Smoktunovski, overact. The Italian actors are generally more restrained than the Russian ones, just as Mikhalkov's Italian sequences are less cinematically inflated than his Russian ones.

Ecce Bombo, Nanni Moretti, 1978; and *Golden Dreams*, Nanni Moretti, 1981 (*The New Republic*, 1 October 1990)

Two early films by Nanni Moretti—also an actor-writer-director—were shown briefly in New York in late summer. In August the Film Society of Lincoln Center presented a sixteen-day series, with at least two films a day, of some of the best Italian work since World War II. Included were *Ecce Bombo*, Moretti's début in 1978, and *Golden Dreams*, winner of the 1981 Venice prize.

Under the credits of the first, we hear a man's hoarse voice calling the words "Ecce Bombo," roughly "Here comes Bombo," and only well along in the picture do we learn that this is the cry of a street vendor as he peddles his cart along. The connection of this image with the rest of the film is slim but wiry. The story is mostly concerned with a young Roman student named Michele, played by Moretti, and four male friends—and some girlfriends—who are shopping and selling: shopping for ways to live or selling views that they hold. From start to finish *Ecce Bombo* is the work of an iconoclastic temperament, witty, rude, eruptive, compassionate—something like a young Godard who has seen the films of the first young Godard.

The picture is immersed in film reference. It begins on a film set. On Michele's bedroom wall is a huge photo of Buster Keaton. When Michele quarrels with a middle-class boor, his crowning insult is "You deserve Alberto Sordi"—Sordi being the adored comic film embodiment of middle-class troubles.

Ecce Bombo is a latter-day urban version of Fellini's *I Vitelloni*, which dealt with small-town youthful discontent in 1953. *Golden Dreams* is a contemporary treatment of some of the themes of Fellini's *8½*, which dealt with the creative difficulties of a film director in 1963. Moretti again plays a Michele (not exactly the same one—the family backgrounds are different) who has made a first film something like *Ecce Bombo* and who is now trying to organize his second film while running the gauntlet of public appearances and debates about his first. He even engages in a TV confrontation with another young director that ends in a boxing match.

All this is dryly funny; what are hilarious are the scenes from a film he is writing about Freud, his daughter, and his mother. Michele sits down to write their scenes. We then watch the scenes and watch Freud and his family falter as we cut to Michele's pen faltering. Moretti also plays another young man in *Golden Dreams*, a bearded professor in love with one of his students, about whom he fantasizes. This strand of fantasy ends with a horror-movie joke. And we see a sequence from a different young director's film, a spry musical about Vietnam protests in 1968, clearly meant to show us how emptily theatrical those protests seem to Michele's generation.

Both of these Moretti films are overlong, seemingly crammed with everything that was on his mind; yet both of them reveal a bursting, angry, exultant spirit, an individual inscribing his generation's particularities on the

screen with talent and imagination. His best qualities surged forward to complete realization in his 1985 film *The Mass Is Ended*, in which Moretti was a young priest trying to deal with the problems of his former university companions in Rome. That beautiful work is Moretti's *summa* so far.

In any case, despite any reservations, Italy is lucky to have such an artist at work as Moretti, tragi-comedian of the visible and invisible life around him.

***Palombella Rossa*, Nanni Moretti, 1989 (*The New Republic*, 23 April 1990)**

Two years ago, Nanni Moretti's *The Mass Is Ended* (1985) was seen in the United States briefly. It was Moretti's fourth feature but his first to be released in this country, and it explained his high reputation in Europe as writer, director, and actor. (He plays his own leading roles.) The film dealt with the difficulties facing an earnest young priest in Italy today, and an Italian friend of mine called it the best treatment of post-1968 Italy that he had seen. A hostile New York press cut short the film's run.

Recently, in the New Directors/New Films series sponsored by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art, there was a chance to see Moretti's latest. *Palombella Rossa*. Literally this title means red wood-pigeon, and I don't understand its application. The film is about a water-polo match (a sport that Moretti used to play professionally), treated as a metaphor of crisis for the Moretti character—a Communist in intellectual difficulties today.

Moretti, who is now thirty-seven, uses the metaphor gracefully, wittily, in a style that owes something to Fellini but has its own touching gravity. This is not as wholly satisfying a film as *The Mass Is Ended*, but it proves again that Moretti is a refined, perceptive, endearing artist. And the two showings of *Palombella Rossa* in that recent series apparently constitute its entire American career.

In Peter Bondanella's valuable *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (1990), he writes of the 1980s:

> Only two figures, Nanni Moretti and Pupi Avati—both undeservedly little known outside of Italy—may be said to have earned the right to be considered as first-rank directors with a body of work that stands in comparison to that of their older and better-established colleagues.

I've never had a chance to see anything of Avati's. Of Moretti I've seen just enough to know what American filmgoers are missing.

***Dear Diary*, Nanni Moretti, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 17 October 1994)**

In 1988 Nanni Moretti's masterpiece *The Mass Is Ended* (1985) was shown in New York and was obtusely treated by the press. A bit of Moretti's earlier and later work was seen subsequently in New York in special showings, but nothing happened to make up for that mistreatment, to establish Moretti in this country with anything like his European reputation. There, a celebrated artist who writes, directs, and stars in ultra-serious, frenetic comedies about his life and times, he is celebrated. Here in the United States, zippo.

Two recent announcements cheered me up. The film branch of the Joseph Papp Public Theater announced a retrospective of Moretti's seven films, and the

New York Film Festival announced the premiere of his eighth film, to be released shortly afterward.

At the Public I saw a Moretti new to me and saw again two that I knew. The first was *Bianca* (1984), in which he plays an oddball mathematics teacher at an oddball high school—named for Marilyn Monroe—where he has a passion for a student. I previously had seen, and enjoyed again, *Golden Dreams*, made in 1981, in which Moretti is more or less himself, a film director heckled by coevals for waxing slothful. The climax is a television debate between him and a "rival" director, each supported by his fans, which includes a boxing match between the pair.

And I saw for the third time *The Mass Is Ended*. Moretti plays a young priest who, after a time in a rural church, is assigned to his native Rome, where he frequently sees his family and his old university friends. He is utterly devoted to his parochial work, and he tries to help his friends with their various problems, his sister and his parents with theirs. He fails completely: religion, in his person anyway, batters fruitlessly at modern complexities. An exception is an older friend who, after some foolish intoxication with the idea of becoming a priest, marries—is married by Moretti. The priest himself is soon to leave Rome for a wind-lashed church in Tierra del Fuego, where he will be needed. His character, he thinks, will be more suited to that place.

That basic character is more or less the same in all of the three films and in (as I remember) two others that I have seen: a questing, perturbed, whimsical young man, as dissatisfied with himself as he is with the world. Political tremors vibrate around him. (Moretti has made a documentary that I have not seen of the latter-day fate of the Italian Communist Party.) He gets into troubles by following impulses. He asks sharp questions of complete strangers; he converses intimately with people he doesn't know; sometimes when frustrated he even throws himself on the ground in tantrums. In short, he behaves like a highly intelligent, witty child in an adult's body.

Moretti sometimes has been called the Italian Woody Allen. Not really so. Quite apart from the relative quality of their writing-directing-acting gifts, their personae are markedly different. Allen is an often funny, worried, whining stand-up comic, exiled from nightclubs, who wants us to know he has read some books. Moretti behaves as if he had been present at the Creation, is awed by this privilege, and is furious at everyone who can't see the miracle—including himself when he wavers.

Two other characteristics run through his films, related to the child-man. He always gets to play at least a little football (soccer). He always gets to eat some sweets, usually pastries. (And keeps thin.) His production company is called Sacher Films, after Sacher-torte, the Viennese killer chocolate cake.

All of the above are in his latest, *Dear Diary*. In a way it's his most daring film so far because it's about so little. Yet it succeeds, through his easy charm, his outbursts that are moving or amusing, the neat planning of the "freehand" moments. The Moretti character this time is Moretti, presumably telling us truths about himself as we follow him through three "chapters" of his diary.

The first, "On My Vespa," opens with the camera trailing Moretti as he rides through lovely Roman streets on a summer day while we hear his thoughts. He visits different residential districts and comments tellingly on them, but this is secondary: he's really using Rome itself, its winding streets and foliage, to hold us.

The streets are almost empty. When he meets people, all of them strangers, he speaks to them as if they had been in the middle of a conversation.

The chapter ends with a trip to the dreary spot where Pasolini was murdered in 1975, a place to which Moretti had not been before and that he seemingly felt he owed a visit. All the high points of this chapter are connected with film. As he rides, he thinks of the spate of despairing Italian films in which youngish characters moan about their decay, and we see a sharp spoof of a scene from such a film. Moretti, reveling in his sunny city, shouts at these characters to dissociate himself from them. Then there's a good gag connected with the American picture *Flashdance* (1983). And, after telling us that in summer the only films being shown are horror and porn, Moretti quotes from a high-flown intellectual rave about horror films. In a fantasy scene he sits beside the bed of the critic who wrote this lofty nonsense and reads it to him insistently while the critic weeps and begs for mercy and tries to cover his ears with his pillow.

In Chapter Two, "Islands," Moretti goes to Lipari, an island off Sicily, to work on a film script. He stays with an eremitic philosopher friend, Gerardo, who never watches television. For various reasons the two men visit other islands, and, through Moretti, Gerardo is introduced to TV. He is infected. On Stromboli he shouts down the slopes of the volcano to Moretti, asking him to relay questions to some American tourists about the fate of certain characters in soap operas.

Chapter Three, "Doctors," tells of a year that Moretti spent in going to various Roman dermatologists to rid himself of an itch that was driving him mad. One specialist after another prescribes a long list of drugs, each list different. He even tries acupuncture with two grave Chinese doctors. None of any of the prescriptions and treatments is of any use. By treating it all straight-faced, by never losing his temper with the doctors, Moretti manages to make the long medical pilgrimage funny. Finally, at a doctor-friend's suggestion, he has a CAT scan, and a growth is discovered on one of his lungs. The radiologist says it is inoperable; the doctor-friend disagrees. The growth is removed, the itch disappears, and Moretti is spared to us.

He is in his early forties. As long as he is alive (may it be long), he will be encountering life, its irritations—which infuriate him—and its joys—which in a way infuriate him even more because they are insufficiently appreciated. Presumably he will be sending back film reports to us on these encounters. Lucky us.

***Tilaï*, Idrissa Ouédraogo, 1990 (*The New Republic*, 17 December 1990)**

Space is one of the key terms in film discussion, and, like every critical term, it has various applications. Renoir's planes of movement within a room are one kind of spatial discrimination. Antonioni's linkage of people to urban vistas is a way of using space as twentieth-century fate. John Ford's view of space dramatizes Frederick Jackson Turner's concept of the frontier principle in American life.

The use of space in Idrissa Ouédraogo's films might at first seem connected with Ford's idea—drama about people-shaped dots in the middle of immensity. Both in *Yaaba* (1989), seen last year, and now in *Tilaï*, everything happens on a huge platter of earth under a huge inverted bowl of sky. Between them, a tiny village. This might suggest Ford. But there is a great difference. Ford's films, which

center on white people though they contain Indians, are not called Westerns for nothing: they are about Westerners entering a new domain, different from that of their forebears. Ouédraogo's films, set in his native Burkina Faso, are about people whose forebears never lived anywhere else.

The oddity, to an American viewer, is that these Africans do not seem aware of space. Ford's people—to some extent this includes his Indians—are conscious of the vastness around them and have developed self-sufficiencies to deal with solitude. The Burkina Faso people seem not to know that anyone else lives differently and have no comparisons to make.

Yet there is a relation between their way of life and their awesome environment. The manner in which these villagers speak, beginning every utterance with the name of the person addressed, gives their talk a certain size whether the actual subject is large or trifling. The laws that govern them, laws of marriage and fidelity and the capital punishment for breaching them, seem carved in invisible gigantic rock. The details of their daily lives, those flimsy huts, that frugal food, are small-scale; their inner lives, conceived in obligation, are large and rugged.

"Tilaï" means The Law. The story is built on an opening fact so simple yet foreboding that it seems like a pronouncement by the chorus at the start of a classic tragedy. A young man returns to his village after an absence of some time to find that his intended bride has been taken and married by his father. Once we know that, we know that blood will be spilled. The Italians say, "Mort' di fratello, mort' di coltello" (death of a brother, death by the knife); or, when close relatives quarrel, somebody dies. So it proves.

As in *Yaaba*, Ouédraogo makes the difficulties of his work seem nonexistent. We are never conscious that the people we see are not professional actors. With his knowledge of their lives, with his affinity for truth, Ouédraogo wipes away self-consciousness. Ina Cissé and Rasmané Ouédraogo—presumably he's related to the director—are especially affecting as the filched bride and the frustrated lover. With the cinematography of Jean Monsigny and Pierre-Laurent Chénieux, the director brings even the heat of the place to his film—without strain. Every shot in the picture is framed by a sophisticated eye, but we feel the effect of the shot much more than we think about the director's eye.

Tilaï, even at its peak moments, is not greatly moving. Even the deaths seem ritualistic, rather than personal. But this may be an aspect of the culture. Perhaps the intent is less to wring our withers than to trace, slowly and gracefully, the idea of inevitability. In any case, with his two films seen in the United States, Ouédraogo has already made a unique contribution to world cinema—and has aroused expectation.

***Samba Traoré*, Idrissa Ouédraogo, 1992 (*The New Republic*, 4 October 1993)**

Some of the actors in *Samba Traoré* are acknowledged amateurs, natives of Burkina Faso, where the film is set, but the roles they play are apparently so much in the fabric of their usual lives that there are no seams. They are helped, too, the director tells us, by the fact that he tailored scenes to fit them. They are also helped by the fact that none of them (I assume) has any professional ambition, so there's no self-consciousness, no attempt to "do" what they are doing.

Some of the actors, however, are professional and have had training.

Bakary Sangaré, who has the title role, has even worked with Peter Brook in Paris. The paradoxical triumph of the professionals here is that they are indistinguishable from the amateurs.

Idrissa Ouédraogo is the author-director, the man who did *Yaaba* (1989) and *Tilaï* (1990) and who again shows such confident skill that his purity of intent comes through unimpeded. The new film, though it's set among the same sorts of people, is basically different from the earlier ones. *Yaaba* and *Tilaï* took their entire beings, their incidents and arch, from the dailiness of village life. *Samba Traoré* has more of a constructed story.

The film, spoken in Mòoré, or Mossi—one of the country's many dialects—opens with Samba committing a robbery in the city. He flees to his native village with the loot, and we see how both village honesty and the police ultimately bring his misdeed into the open. The story doesn't open the sense of immensity that *Tilaï* had; still, because of Ouédraogo's knowledge and love of the people, it has immediacy and warmth, it stirs concern.

Two points. First, I wasn't clear about the source, in this tiny remote village, of items that suddenly appear, like new beds, a new bicycle, a saddled horse. Second, Mariam Kaba, who plays Samba's eventual bride, is one of the most beautiful human beings I have seen in years.

Days and Nights in the Forest, Satyajit Ray, 1970 (*The New Republic*, 21 April 1973)

Neglect is benign for some artists. An American novelist named William March was thought by some to be a neglected fine writer until a large anthology of his work was published; that finished March. The Indian director, Satyajit Ray, is a first-class artist—until you see his films. As long as he isn't imported, one can talk about injustice and neglect. But then along comes a Ray film, and, allowing for such exceptions as *Aparajito* (*The Unvanquished*, 1956) and *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964), it is usually a mild and fairly dull item.

Days and Nights in the Forest, a newly released Ray film, is milder and dull, wretchedly photographed, archaically edited, sentimental, and superficial in style and theme. Four young middle-class men from Calcutta drive far out into the country for a holiday. The quartet could hardly be more tritely composed: a dreamer, a buffoon, an athlete, a fusspot. They take over a government forest-bungalow by bribing the caretaker, who is poor and has a sick wife. (Social point here.) One of the four has an affair with a local "bad" girl. (Culture contrast here.) Two Calcutta girls are holidaying nearby and become friendly with two others of the men. (Reverse cultural comment here.)

The banality is relieved only by the charm of a girl named Sharmila Tagore and the near-subtlety of a word game played by the men and the two Calcutta girls. Otherwise it's the sort of film one sees at foreign countries' cultural centers in the United States, where the "travelogue" content makes ninnies overlook the various crudities and sets them wondering why we can't make American-culture films like that. These are usually the people who ignore or dismiss films like *Wanda* (1970) and *Payday* (1973).

The Chess Players, Satyajit Ray, 1977 (*The New Republic*, 3 June 1978)

Satyajit Ray's *The Chess Players* is set in 1830 in Lucknow, the Moslem center of the subcontinent. (This is Ray's first picture in Hindi instead of his native Bengali.) The British, through their army and the East India Company, have been permitting the Moslem kings to rule in the Moslem state of which Lucknow is capital. The present king is a composer, a devotee of dance and song, a connoisseur of the arts, and a very bad ruler. The two title characters are his subjects, wealthy Moslems who spend their days playing chess while the wife of one pines for her husband and the wife of the other does not—she has a lover. The local British commander, because of the bad government and the discontent of the people, moves to take power, by force of arms if necessary, to insure the security of the kingdom for British interests.

These are quasi-Chekhovian materials, obviously. This particular Cherry Orchard is being taken over, not by a *nouveau riche* in mixed awe and vengeance, but by a cold force: still there is the same contrast between an elegant order and a graceless, efficient, but ultimately more humane new order. Once again the East has bowed to the West, the Greeks to the Romans.

But Ray's screenplay does little more than set all this out in the first twenty minutes or so, then go round and round the elements again and again for another two hours—from British commander's office to king's palace to chess game—with no deepening of the characters, about whom there is nothing more to be known after those first twenty minutes, and with only the slow inevitability of the changeover oozing along outside the film's triangular shape. The commander (unattractively right), the king (pleasantly wrong), the two players (pathetic symbols of amiable lethargy), over and over. The one small dramatization of the matter occurs when the two players, to escape army service should the king decide to defend his crown (which he doesn't), move their chess game to a deserted village across the river.

The details of Ray's filmmaking only add to the tedium. About the Hindi dialogue I say nothing, since my Hindi is rusty. But the English dialogue, in the commander's scenes, is stale stuff and is delivered by Richard Attenborough—in Scottish accent—with his voice trapped inside a three-note range and his manner fitted to the first talkie ever made.

The most shocking aspect of the film is that such an experienced director as Ray should be so technically maladroit. In many scenes the camera zooms in for an immense close-up of the speaker for no other reason than that the scene is ending. In one scene with Attenborough, the camera follows him at waist level as he crosses the room so that, when he sits, his head will come into frame—a clumsiness that no good film school would allow in a first-year student. When the two nobles are playing in the deserted village near the end, they spy a boy some distance off whom they call to serve them. We see the boy from their viewpoint, then in a long shot, then we look from behind him to the two men, then we follow the boy in a traveling shot as he walks toward them—all this fuss about a tiny detail in the story and all of it revealing the still-recurrent insecurity in Ray's technique. For the viewer who knows or cares little about such matters, the effect is unconsciously distracting, unclean.

Satyajit Ray's control thus continues to fluctuate, his style refuses to resolve. If he makes *Aparajito* (*The Unvanquished*, 1956) and *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964), he also makes *Days and Nights in the Forest* (1970) and *The*

Chess Players. Next move . . .

***The Home and the World*, Satyajit Ray, 1984 (*The New Republic*, 8 July 1985)**

All his life the Bengali director Satyajit Ray has been associated with Rabindranath Tagore. The poet-novelist was a friend of Ray's family, and Ray went to an art school founded by Tagore. In 1961 Ray made a film about Tagore, but eighteen years earlier, before the director's career had actually started, his first screenplay was an adaptation of Tagore's novel *The Home and the World*, for which he even scouted locations. This production did not materialize; twenty-four other films then intervened. Now at last comes Ray's film of *The Home and the World*. My next sentence is not the one I'd like to write: it ought to contain the word "masterpiece," but it can't. *The Home and the World* is a delicate work, made by a director who has learned much, discarded much, and grown; but it amounts to a thoroughly understood set of interweaving patterns rather than an overwhelming film.

As per the title, the patterns are personal and political. The time is around 1907, the place is East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Lord Curzon, the British viceroy, has split Bengal into two administrative units, separating Hindu from Moslem, in the belief that "divide and rule" will strengthen the imperial grip. We see something of Moslem protest, but we concentrate on Hindus. Some Hindus are activist, even terrorist, in anti-British feeling; some Hindus, equally opposed to the British, are afraid that a boycott will hurt the poor, who depend on cheap British goods, and will also inflame trouble with the Moslems.

One in the first group of Hindus is Sandip, played by Soumitra Chatterjee, a veteran of twelve Ray films. One in the latter is Nikhil, played by Victor Banerjee, lately seen as Dr. Aziz in David Lean's *A Passage to India* (1984). The differences between these two friends—Sandip, the leader of the activists, and Nikhil, the wealthy merchant with true humanitarian concerns—dramatize the changes in the world. The changes in the home come from those same humane, enlightening motives in Nikhil, who insists that his wife Bimala (Swatilekha Chatterjee) learn to speak English as he does and that she come out of *purdah* (the practice of screening women from men or strangers, especially by means of a curtain), that she meet his friends. From the alterations in home life comes an affair, brief but passionate, between Bimala and Sandip; from the turmoil in the world comes Nikhil's death.

One characteristic of Ray's films, not constant but recurrent, has been the microcosm, the small system that implicates great forces. *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964, and also taken from Tagore) and *The Chess Players* (1977) are two such works; *The Home and the World* is another. Most of the action takes place in a few rooms in the large home of the married couple, with the world swirling around it and finally obtruding. Much of the screen time is occupied by two characters only—some pairing of the three principals. The chamber play effect is heightened by Ray's use of the camera. He keeps close to his players most of the time, not literally in close-up but to convey the idea that *they* are conscious of their closeness to each other, that confinement of various sorts is on their minds. (Ray uses mirrors once in a while as if to suggest potential enlargement of the confines.) In one particularly subtle scene, the one in which Bimala first really becomes aware of Sandip's attractiveness, he is seated on the arm of a sofa in the middle of

a large room and, as they talk, she moves from point to point in a wide circle around him, thus making him the new center of her life.

The film runs 130 minutes, and its length only underscores an early awareness in us. The director's love for his characters, the commitment of the actors to their work, the richness of physical detail don't compensate for the fact that we quite soon know what will happen. It isn't plot novelty or character idiosyncrasy that is missing, it is deepening. What we get, essentially, is a long statement of genuineness at more or less the same level. Time, sheer duration, inevitably either strengthens or weakens a film. Duration doesn't help *The Home and the World*.

***Branches of the Tree*, Satyajit Ray, 1990 (*The New Republic*, 11 May 1992)**

Satyajit Ray makes an assumption about his viewers. He assumes that they can be interested in a film that simply dwells with its characters, rather than one that imposes dramatic patterns on their lives. Part of his assumption rests on a common culture with his immediate public. ("All my films are made with my own Bengali audience in view," he has said.) But by now, after nearly forty years of filmmaking and more than thirty films, he knows that his work touches other viewers as well, that, by being faithfully Bengali, he can also reach other sorts of people. His films are one more example of the truism that the road to universality starts in a particularized place.

This is a far cry from saying that Ray's films are international smasheroos. (They aren't even national smasheroos: only fifty-five million of India's 840 million speak Bengali.) At home, in West Bengal, the films cut across several social strata; abroad they are epicurean. The critic Rustom Bharucha, himself Calcuttan but writing in America, said, "If one had to select an essentially cinematic quality that epitomizes Ray's films, it would be his acute awareness of the minuscule," which limits their occidental appeal.

Sometimes Ray can carry this minuscular quality so far that his films become not daintily precious but almost busily bland, as if the camera had been stuck through a window somewhat in Andy Warhol fashion to record undifferentiated dailiness. But at his best, as in the Apu trilogy (1955-59) and *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964), Ray creates a tension between our general expectations of film and his refusal to fulfill those expectations, thus showing—proving—that film can be and do more.

One of his latest films to reach us, *Branches of the Tree*, restates that quiet proposition quietly. (The film had its New York premiere at the Walter Reade Theater in New York's Lincoln Center, hoping for further release.) The new film is above the middle level of Ray's work, not in the class of the titles above but a gratifying experience for Blakean world-in-a-grain-of-sand people. A much-respected Bengali man, prosperous and public-minded, is given a celebration for his seventieth birthday at which he has a heart attack. One of his sons, whose mind was unsettled in an auto accident, lives with the father but is unable to comprehend what has happened. The man's three other sons hurry from their fairly distant homes, with their families, to be near him. In the week of his recuperation, we grow to know these sons and perceive the moral spectrum that they and their wives encompass. That is all.

The father has always said there is white money and black money; we find

out which of the sons has opted for which. The presence in the house of the father's father, aged ninety-three, and of a child helps to give us a sense of the line in which these ethical questions are set, and the mentally incompetent son supplies a kind of null amorality. (One of the sons has been so revolted by the peculations of his employer that he has quit his job to enter a purer world, the theater. Evidently purity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.)

Almost all of the film takes place indoors, in the ill man's house. The camera opens on a huge flower arrangement in the middle of a drawing-room table, then concentrates on the paterfamilias and his afflicted son. A servant comes in to clear things and leaves, walking past the camera with seeming disregard of his place in focus. When Ray is operating at his most astute, as he is here, he is trying to controvert the Heisenberg principle: these people are observed without disturbing the order of their lives. This pleasant artifice of non-artifice continues throughout.

Ray, who writes his own screenplays though often from other material, is sometimes called Chekhovian. This seems to me superficial. Chekhov, incomparably subtle and implicative though he was, used those qualities to dramatize lives. Ray's intent is more like Yasujiro Ozu's. (In fact, *Branches of the Tree* has some resemblance to the last section of *Tokyo Story* [1953].) The artist's vocation, according to this intent, is to find revealing currents of life, to respect them and let them flow. Ray lacks Ozu's complete technical mastery; there is some bumpy editing. And the performances sometimes stray into theatricality. But his ambition is the same as Ozu's.

Those who saw the last Oscar telecast saw Ray accepting a special award in his hospital bed in Calcutta. He has been gravely ill for some time. But there is at least one more completed film, *The Stranger* (1991), coming to the Walter Reade and, I hope, to other places.

***The Broken Journey*, Satyajit Ray, 1994 (*The New Republic*, 19 June 1995)**

The Broken Journey was written by Satyajit Ray toward the end of his life when he was ailing and was directed by his son Sandip. Ray *père* had long been hospitalized, with plenty of time to consider the medical profession in India, its concerns and priorities. His story, like several he wrote in later years, focuses on a member of the upper classes, in this case a successful physician in Calcutta, and the person's sequestering within his social stratum. Because of a flat tire on a motor trip—the doctor is on his way to address a Rotarian meeting—he gets involved in the medical crisis of an impoverished villager, and the doctor's social views are broadened.

This is by far the simplest Ray screenplay I know, an explicit morality drama. Its strength grows from the non-homiletic intent of the author, his genuine concern for the classes buried under social stigma. But no one will place this film among Ray's major works. Sandip Ray, who began directing in 1980 and who had directed several of his father's TV scripts, clearly has tried to follow his father's style. (In an interview with Andrew Robinson in 1989, when Sandip was assisting his father on a film, Ray senior said, "He knows exactly what I want.") Sandip uses panning shots of a kind I don't remember in his father's films—opening on an object, then moving to a person—but generally the purpose of the directing is as Satyajit would have wanted: to induce us to really look at people, to value them

adequately.

Soumitra Chatterjee, in his fifteenth Ray role, is thoroughly convincing as the doctor, and Subhalakshmi Munshi is lovely as the sick villager's daughter who now, with the doctor's help, may become a nurse.

Mon Oncle d'Amérique, Alain Resnais, 1980 (*The New Republic*, 17 January 1981)

A friend of mine, French-born and versed in French culture, says that the French cultural weakness is shallow profundity. In film, the strongest support for this criticism comes from Alain Resnais. Increasingly through the years, his films have become like the legend of that wonderful French actor with the wonderful voice, sounding wonderful as he reads the telephone book.

Hiroshima, mon amour (1959) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), seen again, are better off not seen again. The more recent ones, culminating in the velour-brained *Providence* (1977), have been less impressive even on first viewing. Now comes *Mon Oncle d'Amérque*, the most trivial of the lot and the most apparently so because it is shorn of the former Resnais *luxe* and depends on sprightliness. Without his previous cinematic upholstery, Resnais is more nakedly banal.

He has been much impressed with the work of a French behavioral scientist named Henri Laborit, and he has woven the picture around shots of Laborit himself, discoursing to us at his desk. (The script is by the veteran Jean Gruault, but presumably the impulse for the film, as usual, was Resnais's.) Laborit may, for all I know, be a scientist of merit, but his remarks in this film are sub-*Reader's Digest;* and Resnais's dramatization of Laborit's theories is so trite, so unexpanding of either our scientific knowledge or our human experience, that the effect is like that of those TV commercials where a wife helps her sneezing husband with some medicine, then a man in a white coat says, "Yes! Laboratory tests prove . . . Gloppo brings instant relief *faster*."

Once, to my knowledge, this interweaving of a scientist's discourse with an apposite story was well done—in Dušan Makavejev's ironic-tragic *Love Affair, or the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* (1967). I'd bet that Resnais knows Makavejev's immensely superior film, but it hasn't helped him. The French script braids the stories of three people who are at first unacquainted: a textile executive, hardworking but dull, Gérard Depardieu; a public functionary, Roger Pierre; and an actress of sorts, Nicole Garcia. (The title refers to a mythical relative on whom responsibilities and prospects are laden.) These three and others go through strophes of ambition, desire, competition, success, and failure, about none of which there is the slightest obscurity but all of which the doctor is lugged in to explain. If that's not enough, after we see white rats experimented with in his lab, some scenes between the characters are re-played with the actors wearing rat masks. And if *that's* not enough, shots of French film stars—Danielle Darrieux, Jean Marais, Jean Gabin—are spliced in to explain the characters' role models.

Absolutely nothing about human behavior is opened up by this film, although its portentous apparatus is a booby-trap that has already trapped some boobies. What's more to the point, as a comedy that is commented on as it goes,

it's badly failed Sacha Guitry. Resnais is one of the *papier-mâché* monuments of cinema.

Mélo, Alain Resnais, 1986 (*The New Republic*, 7 March 1988)

Henri Bernstein (1876-1953) was a very popular Parisian boulevard playwright, a craftsman of light plays on weighty subjects. Many of his plays were made into films. *Mélo* (1929) was filmed five times, two of those versions in German—with Elisabeth Bergner in 1932 and with Maria Schell in 1952.

Now Alain Resnais has filmed it again with himself as star, so to speak, and with apparently very little screen adaptation. The reasons for Resnais's choice lie elsewhere than in the quality of this conventional, skillfully machined piece. One guess: he had worked with his four principal actors twice before and found a script that would accommodate them again. Another guess: filming it more or less as it is in the original would challenge his ingenuity.

Essentially it's a triangle comedy-drama with one appended character. André Dussollier plays a successful violinist who visits a conservatory classmate, Pierre Arditi, now much less successful, and meets Arditi's wife, Sabine Azema. (The wife's role was obviously built up in the German versions.) Her cousin, Fanny Ardant, is briefly introduced. Azema then contrives a visit to Dussollier's apartment, and they become lovers.

The play deepens, relatively speaking, as the wife develops torments of conscience and kills herself. The big scene is between the two men in the third act. (I use the word "act" because Resnais keeps reminding us of theater provenance: a curtain at the beginning, twice during the film, and again at the end.) It's three years later. Arditi, now married to Ardant, is about to leave Paris forever; he visits Dussollier and beseeches him to confess that he was Azema's lover. Just to have it settled in his mind. Dussollier lies with complete conviction—to reassure Pierre, to keep relationships as they are, and probably also to assure himself that he *can* lie, that he can play a role as well as he plays the violin.

The play/film is Dussollier's to make, and he succeeds. He lies with such heartfelt sincerity that he achieves the small frisson that Bernstein was after: How can we ever know when someone is speaking the truth? Azema (who was the artist's capricious daughter in Tavernier's *A Sunday in the Country* [1984]) has dazzle and shade. Arditi has exactly the right tone, a self-knowledge of mediocrity without self-pity. Ardant is adequate in her small role.

Resnais has solved all the problems involved. The film takes place mainly in three settings, and most of the time he keeps it from feeling confined—no small achievement in a piece that runs almost two hours. The question remains: Why did he want to solve these particular problems? Can he really believe that there are profundities in the play, or did he just want to work again with these four actors? Or did he want to show that he could deal with a lightweight boulevard play as well as his heavier materials in the past? In fact I enjoyed *Mélo* much more than the last Resnais I saw, *Mon Oncle d'Amérique* (1980), but it's still like an encore piece, after a serious recital—an encore, again, that runs almost two hours.

The Aviator's Wife, Éric Rohmer, 1981 (*The New Republic*, 14 October 1981)

When an artist has been as fine as Éric Rohmer, particularly in an art as unstable and treacherous as film, there's a temptation to take his career as symptomatic of that art's possibilities. "If this is what happens to *him*," we infer, "then this must be the best that his art can permit. His work is delineating the limits of possibility."

Obviously that paragraph wouldn't have been written if Rohmer's new film were good. The troubles implicit here are not the usual directors' woes: money or casting or extrinsic hassles. Maybe there were such difficulties for Rohmer, but they're not apparent, not even important. The problems here are intrinsic, fundamental: they would pertain if filmmaking were no more expensive or technologically complex than composing a poem.

Rohmer began as a writer. He wrote fiction before film criticism, before he started his own magazine in Paris, *La Gazette du cinéma*, in 1950. His *Six Moral Tales* (1963-72), most of them now well known as films, were written as stories, said Rohmer, before he knew he was going to be a filmmaker. They were translated and published last year (by Viking), and they are self-sufficient, good fiction. Rohmer's subsequent films of them are, like Malraux's and Handke's films, realizations in another art of material already realized as writing by the same man.

So the films of his *Six Moral Tales*, including those exquisite pictures *Claire's Knee* (1970), *My Night at Maud's* (1969), and *Chloe in the Afternoon* (1972), have a kind of umbilical link with literature. Rohmer found ways to transmute literature into film: that process has been the center of his style. He has not been a stodgy, "literary" director: he has been a unique and daring *film* artist, a synesthetic alchemist. Apparently he needed this connection with literature in order to film at all because, when he had finished with his own six good stories, he moved on to adapt two world masterpieces, Kleist's *The Marquise of O. . .* in 1976 and Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* in 1978. The former film is now widely recognized as a treasure in our heritage of great cinema. The latter shows Rohmer bravely urging the film form to an aesthetic accommodation that is beyond it. If the phrase "noble failure" can ever be used unpatronizingly, *Perceval* is the instance.

After a three-year absence, during which he staged a Kleist play in Paris, Rohmer has launched a new series of films that he calls *Comedies and Proverbs*. The opening film is now shown in the U.S., *The Aviator's Wife,* and my first question is whether he has cut the ties to literature-as-base that had previously sustained him. Did he write this story first as a *story*? I must doubt it: because this new film is not only the thinnest Rohmer that I know, its method is a reversion to the anti-writer style of the earliest French New Wave.

The Aviator's Wife centers on François, a Paris student and part-time postal worker, in love with Anne, an office worker, who is tiring of him. Christian, an aviator, who too has had an affair with Anne, tells her that their relation is finished. François sees Christian leaving Anne's apartment, spots him at a café later, and spends the day following Christian and a blonde woman who joins him. François assumes that the blonde is Christian's wife, whose move to Paris is his reason for leaving Anne. During this surveillance François picks up a fifteen-year-old student, Lucie, who amuses herself by spending the afternoon with François watching the other pair. When Lucie has to leave, she gives François her address. It turns out that the blonde is Christian's sister, not his wife (for all that this matters). In the end, after a long to-and-fro scene in Anne's bedroom highly

reminiscent of the long bedroom scene in Godard's *Breathless* (1960), François and Anne are possibly reconciled. She nevertheless tells him to write Lucie, whom he has mentioned. That night, when he arrives at Lucie's apartment house to leave a note, he sees her kissing a young man good-bye. Presumably François is now going to follow that young man as he did Christian, and the picture ends with a sentimental ballad about Paris on the soundtrack.

The story—deliberately, I assume—has no narrative richness: it's meant to simulate the dailiness of the lives involved. The camera follows François and the others the way François follows Christian, wherever the meandering may lead, encouraging moodiness, pointless chatter, and tiny conversational games. It's much like what Godard and Varda and others were doing so many years ago, glorying in the power of film to renounce traditional drama: film's power, merely by presence and penetration, to be *with* people and let their beings be the film. (Coincidentally, perhaps, Philippe Marlaud, who plays François, and Anne-Laure Meury, the Lucie, suggest Michel Debord and Catherine-Isabelle Duport of Godard's *Masculine/Feminine* [1966].) But, besides the fact that Rohmer's use of the method now seems imitative, the Godard of those days was using the method as one of a series of attacks on "classic" cinema, and Rohmer is not. At one point Rohmer irises out and in again to denote a time lapse—a device that's embarrassingly out of texture, a failed *jeu*, as if a middle-aged man were doing a few rock steps.

What Rohmer intended to be simple is vapid. What he intended to be eddying and insightful is garrulous. And the people whom he chose to "fill" the screen—especially the rather whiny and unappealing Marie Rivière, who plays Anne—don't. I kept remembering Jean Eustache's *The Mother and the Whore* (1973), where the three people on whom he concentrated became the theater of the film. Most certainly not so here.

I'm not positive that Rohmer wrote this screenplay directly for the screen instead of finishing it first as prose narrative, but it certainly lacks the assurance of his earlier work. Some of the dialogue may even have been improvised, again *à la* early New Wave. Possibly because he no longer had the literary support that he always had before, he has fallen back on French cinematic platitudes. He *has* written an explanation of what the new *Comedies and Proverbs* series will be about, telling us that they will be theater-oriented—which is not perceptible in *The Aviator's Wife*—and that the series will not be limited to six. The motto of this film is "One can't think of nothing," which is neither comic nor proverbial. But I won't quote further from his statement about the series because it too strongly underscores the film's faults: Gallic cinematic bloat at its most tedious.

To be saying these things about Rohmer! Possibly—and this was the opening worry of my review—what's happening to him is a film fate. His literary-cinema linkage was his form of film *creation*, and perhaps he has abandoned it, not because he couldn't find another literary work he wanted to adapt, but because the process of creation that such adaptation meant to him has weakened. This new non-adaptation, the unworthiest Rohmer film that I know, makes me wonder whether this new move, far from being liberation or innovation, may be a sign of exhaustion.

Perhaps it's no longer possible to have a lifelong career as a fertile film artist. The circumstances, not merely financial, that supported an Ozu or Mizoguchi or Ford or Renoir no longer pertain. Recently Bergman has announced

that he will make only two more films, though he is now only sixty-three. The varyingly interesting men who began work after 1950—Fellini, Antonioni, Olmi, Jancsó, Kubrick, Peckinpah, and Teshigahara, among others—seem to fall away sooner or later into desperation or silence or rhetoric. Occasionally they flicker up again, like Fellini, but they don't have "reliable" careers. The younger generation is even more quickly disappointing. The French director Bertrand Blier made his American début with the harsh, valuably disturbing *Going Places* (1974), then lost his teeth through chewing on sugar until he hit sweet success with *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* (1978); and lately he has come up with *Beau-père* (*Stepfather*, 1981): a sentimental concoction about a young man living with a woman who has a fourteen-year-old daughter and who, after the woman is killed, has an affair with the demanding girl though he is, in a sense, her stepfather. It couldn't be more soggily daring. So, within seven years, Blier has gone into the French candy business.

Money is not the central issue (for once!). A continually fruitful creative life is harder in any art than it used to be, and perhaps the film world is more vampiric than other arts, perhaps it drains and demands more. A theater lighting designer I know says that every talented theater director has twelve good productions in him. I don't take that as gospel, but if it is even faintly suggestive in regard to theater troubles, it gets frighteningly magnified when we think about film. If Éric Rohmer, wonderful artist that he has been, not only can make a film like this but can also surround it with fanfares of assertion and ambition, I'm tempted to think that somewhere in himself he feels fear, emptiness, and is reacting with more bravado than art.

I'd like little better than to apologize for this review in a year or two.

Le Beau Mariage, Éric Rohmer, 1982 (*The New Republic*, 4 October 1982)

An American director, now retired, used to gibe at unfriendly critics by saying that, if his films were made in French, those critics would approve them. During *Le Beau Mariage* (*A Good Marriage*), I couldn't help thinking exactly the reverse: if this film had been made in English, in America, possibly some of the critics who have praised it might have seen its banality. That's an especially harsh term to use because the writer-director was Éric Rohmer. His last film was *The Aviator's Wife* (1981), about which I wrote adversely. I speculated about the emptiness I thought it revealed, and ended by hoping I could apologize for the review in the future. Not yet.

Rohmer is sure of a high place in film history. Between 1963 and 1972 he made his *Six Moral Tales*, four of which were full-length and were released in the United States to the increasing delight of some of us. Then in 1976 he made, from the Kleist novella, *The Marquise of O. . .*, which is arguably the best film made anywhere in the 1970s. But two years later he produced *Perceval* (1978), out of Chrétien de Troyes, which was aesthetically ambitious but cinematically null. Then after a three-year absence, during which he directed a Kleist play in Paris, he launched a new series, called *Comedies and Proverbs*, of which *The Aviator's Wife* was the disappointing first.

Rohmer's filmmaking, as I've previously noted, has strong links to literature: his *Six Moral Tales* were written as short stories, have been published, and are well worth reading. Then came his films from a great novella and a great

medieval poem. His new series seems to lack the *writing* that gave him cinematic assurance and success (usually). *The Aviator's Wife* was a feeble relapse into New Wave filmic solipsism. *Le Beau Mariage* is at least a return to the true Rohmer style of the *Six Moral Tales*, but the script on which that style is used has little effect or—however you choose to define the term—meaning.

Béatrice Romand, who played Claire's younger sister in *Claire's Knee* (1970) twelve years ago, is here an art history student in Paris who works part-time in an antique shop outside Paris. Romand is having an affair with a married painter in Paris but is turned off by the complications in his life. She decides arbitrarily to marry, though she has no man in mind. A woman friend in the other town, Arielle Dombasle, introduces Romand to her cousin, a single and successful Parisian lawyer. There's a great deal of train travel between the town and Paris. The lawyer, played by André Dussollier, who was so good as Gawain in *Perceval* (and is currently in Pinter's *Betrayal* on the Paris stage), is enforcedly friendly, not very interested, but Romand pursues him, counseled by Dombasle, whose advice turns out to be not only wrong but stupid. Dussollier tries to shunt Romand off without offense, but since she persists, she is inevitably offended and "gives him up." In the last scene she is on that train again, sitting opposite a young man whom we glimpsed briefly at the very beginning. This time a smile develops between them; and we get the not very profound point that Mr. Right has been figuratively under her nose the whole time, figuratively waiting for her.

Rohmer apparently wanted us to go through various strophes of ego exploration, sexual torque, maneuvers, and embarrassments, as a distillation of one available crisis in contemporary society. To this end, he has used the visual mastery of the *Six Moral Tales*: the same personal rhythms, shots held as long or as little as he chooses, rather than as convention dictates; the same simple but unique points of view. The camera team of Bernard Lutic, Romain Winding, and Nicolas Brunet have given him the texture that Nestor Almendros provided in earlier Rohmer films—the feeling that a mosaic of colors and patterns has been assembled, then lacquered with realism.

But all this mastery is applied to an unresponsive script. The lovely execution doesn't deepen the material; it's perceptible *apart* from the material and only emphasizes the slightness and triteness. This is an hour-and-a-half TV script about a girl's failed schemes to get an older man, only it happens to have been made by a fine artist. There's even the scene in which the frustrated girl throws herself face down on her bed in her lonely little room, as if her name were Debbie and there were college pennants on the wall.

Compare *Le Beau Mariage* with Rohmer's *Chloe in the Afternoon* (1972). There are two substantive differences. The protagonist here is a woman (for the first time in Rohmer's career) and the man is married, but the basic situation is the same: a not particularly attractive young woman pursues a man and fails to get him. In *Chloe* we see the young woman grow through need, become larger through her very openness of supplication; we see the man begin to respond almost as much out of compassion as desire, then disengage because of faith committed elsewhere. Essentially, cruel though the conclusion is to Chloe, it is a spiritual drama. The new film is about a calculating nuisance. Calculating nuisances, male or female, can suffer just as much as anyone else, but in this case—partly because of Romand's unaffecting performance—we get no chance to empathize. All our available sympathy, not much anyway, goes to the pursued

person, in this case the man. Rohmer's script and Romand's character never plumb deeper than the conventional marriage game; they aren't deepened just because it's in French and in France.

The painful question with Rohmer is one of tense. Was he an artist? Or is he an artist? At best the question is not yet answered.

Summer (*Le Rayon vert*), Éric Rohmer, 1986 (*The New Republic*, 1 September 1986)

Éric Rohmer's new film is a kind of puzzle. *Summer* (*Le Rayon vert*), the latest in his new series called *Comedies and Proverbs* (begun in 1981), was presumably intended to have some spiritual resonance. This intention is true of all his films, and some of them accomplish it well. Not here.

Nonetheless, *Summer* is the work of a distinctive and admirable stylist. (Its only visual fault is the graininess of some shots— it was made in 16mm, then blown up.) Rohmer has a unique sense of composition, always implicative, and a way of gently pressing on a scene until he gets what he wants from it. For instance, at the start, two young women are chatting at an office desk when the telephone rings. One of them answers and calls a third young woman, Marie Rivière, to the phone. The two other women (of no importance to the story, as we learn) remain in the shot, conversing, while Rivière hears a friend tell her that vacation plans have changed. She is ditched. Her boyfriend has also ditched her. She then walks off-screen. By holding it all in one shot, without any cuts, Rohmer gives us the feeling that a segment of life has been generated and that one of the elements in that segment, Rivière, has been selected for our attention because her peregrinations will reward.

But they don't . The film is laden with portentous trappings. Each sequence is dated—Monday July 2nd, Tuesday July 3rd, and so on—to little point. Many of the scenes—Rivière seated with some friends at a picnic table, Rivière visiting a friend's family in Cherbourg—seem to be done with improvised dialogue and are in themselves interesting, but again to little point. The story is inane. Rivière is left without vacation plans. She tries one place, then another, goes to the Alps and, without even unpacking, returns at once. She cries when alone, sometimes when not alone. Friends try to arrange dates with other men to replace the lost boyfriend. She can't respond; she even runs away. At last, in Biarritz, she meets Mr. Right. Together they go to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, and there they witness the green ray—the rare sunset phenomenon that Jules Verne describes in a novel and that is the film's symbol—and they know they were made for each other.

Rivière plays it neurotically well, a wounded woman, fractured in confidence. But underneath the good acting and the good direction is dime-store-romance travail, concluded with an arbitrary happy ending. A jilted woman flounders around all summer until, a figurative split-second before her vacation is over, she meets someone she likes. Rohmer handles this piffle as if he were doing another *My Night at Maud's* (1969) or *Claire's Knee* (1970). A final puzzle: How could he have been so misled?

Boyfriends and Girlfriends, Éric Rohmer, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 1 August 1988)

Every country seems to be interested in love, but the French like to converse about it more than most. When a French writer runs out of subject matter, or even if he doesn't, *toujours l'amour*. Sometimes other things happen in such a work, but they tend to be background or justification for the love dialogue.

In film the prime exemplar of this French propensity is Éric Rohmer. Between 1963 and 1972 he wrote and directed a series called, as a group, *Six Moral Tales*, all hinging on discussions of love. (He also published the fiction from which he derived the films, and very good stories they are.) The best-known of the six, *My Night at Maud's* (1969), *Claire's Knee* (1970), and *Chloe in the Afternoon* (1972), contain very little action in the usual sense but a good deal of fascinating conversation on their common subject. And each of them dramatizes its moral: an aspect of the risk or mystery that can accompany love.

Then, after two films drawn from other authors, *The Marquise of O . . .* (1976) and *Perceval* (1978), Rohmer launched a new series in 1981 called *Comedies and Proverbs*. So far, this series has been much inferior to the first. All of the later ones are made with his finesse—he's the Cellini of film intimacy—but most of the screenplays are attenuated. The proverbs themselves are not fertile, and the discourse about love, sensitive and witty for a while, palls—because it lacks the spiritual underpinning that the very Catholic Rohmer gave his early sextet. The best of the new is *Pauline at the Beach* (1983), which at least had some Marivaux moves and countermoves to provide comedy. But most of the five are lapidary lapses. So is the sixth and latest, *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*.

The proverb on which this film rests is "The friends of my friends are my friends." (The French title translates as *My Girlfriend's Boyfriend*.) The setting is Cergy-Pontoise, a "new town" just outside Paris. Blanche, an employee of the town's bureau of cultural affairs, strikes up an acquaintance with Léa, who is at computer school. In time Blanche, who is unattached, meets Léa's boyfriend, Fabien, and also meets Alexandre, just a friend of Léa's. Blanche likes Fabien well enough but is smitten by Alexandre, so much so that she becomes tongue-tied in his presence and is miserable later. Matters sort themselves out eventually, in Rohmer's anti-Chekhovian mode. (Chekhov keeps telling us that Cupid really *is* blind, that lives are often made wretched by unrequited love. Rohmer advises his characters to be patient: things will work out.)

The dialogue (through subtitles) is so sharp and frank that we expect substance. It doesn't arrive. Rohmer's directorial skill never wavers, which only adds to the ultimate disappointment. The man who made *Six Moral Tales*, who here chose these quietly interesting actors, who frames each shot subtly, who uses the "new town" (as his admired Antonioni might have done) to adumbrate the desperately chic lives within it—that man, we think, must be designing this film toward some substantive end, as he did in the past. But no: this time, exceptional as Rohmer the director is, Rohmer the writer has been seduced by the hum of his fine-tuned dialogue into thinking that the hum itself is significant.

Emmanuelle Chaulet (Blanche) and Sophie Renoir (Léa) counterpoint each other in much more than the blonde-brunette mode: their voices and personalities, their ways of moving, both blend and contrast. (As do the quite ordinary clothes that Rohmer characters wear, selected for understated contrast and harmony.) The two men, Éric Viellard (Fabien) and François-Éric Gendron (Alexandre), are equally well paired, though they have somewhat less chance for

impact on us. All four, under Rohmer's hand, play like a good string quartet, but the score isn't worthy of them or their leader.

Four Adventures of Reinette and Mirabelle, Éric Rohmer, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 28 August 1989)

Éric Rohmer says he made most of his new film—not his newest, actually, but the latest to be released in the U.S.—while waiting around to get the shots of the "green ray" for *Summer* (1986). The new arrival, called *Four Adventures of Reinette and Mirabelle*, has connections with *Summer*. It uses the same cinematographer, the same editor, and two of the same actors. Also, one of the adventures depends on a particular time of day, in this case the "blue hour" right before dawn, just as *Summer* depended on the "green ray" right before sunset.

Unlike *Summer*, however, this new film, says Rohmer, is not part of his current series, *Comedies and Proverbs*. It's hard to see why not: the tone is similar, and a Rohmerian proverb could easily be adduced as rubric. The dialogue also seems much like that of past Rohmer, to judge by subtitles, though he says it was improvised by the cast (and then takes writing credit anyway).

Reinette and Mirabelle consists of four adventures about two young women. The episodic form suits Rohmer well—revealingly well; its rightness points up why most of his other films in this decade, the '80s, seemed distended. Rohmer's dynamics tend to be vertical: he likes to delve into a territory that is pretty quickly marked out, rather than to press constantly forward horizontally in conventional narrative. Lately his choices of territory have not always been worth the amount of delving he gave them. But here, with four episodes that average twenty-five minutes each, the method and the material fit each other nicely. The delicacy of what he is after in each case is not hurt through stretching.

Reinette is a country shopkeeper's daughter, living off by herself in an abandoned farmhouse while she paints. (The paintings were done by Joëlle Miquel, who plays the part.) She is full of vitality; she savors every incident and experience of the day. Mirabelle, a prematurely world-weary Parisian student, is spending the summer with her parents at their country house. One day—we are now in the first episode, "The Blue Hour"—Mirabelle is bicycling up a remote road when she gets a flat. This is just opposite Reinette's place. Reinette helps her, gives her a meal, tells her about the "blue hour," then invites her to stay overnight to see it the next morning.

The pre-dawn moment—the "hour" is really only the moment between the time when the night birds grown quiet and the day birds begin—is spoiled by a tractor, so Mirabelle agrees to stay still another night. During the day the two of them visit neighboring farmers, obviously real farmers, in a flavorful scene reminiscent of Rouquier's farm film *Farrebique* (1946). When Reinette says that next year she wants to go to art school in Paris, Mirabelle invites her to share her apartment, since her present roommate is leaving. The matter is not immediately settled, because the two, the city sophisticate and the country enthusiast, are not completely affined. But the following morning, they experience the "blue hour" together, and the moment is so lovely that it unites them.

In the next episode, "The Waiter," they are living together in Paris. One morning they agree to meet at noon in a Montparnasse café. Reinette, still a stranger in Paris, has some amusing (and recognizable) experiences trying to find

the place, then has a funny scene with a waiter because he won't break a large bill with which she wants to pay for a coffee. The trouble is worked out with the polish of a smart cabaret sketch.

"The Beggar, the Kleptomaniac, and the Hustler" begins with Mirabelle as she helps, or means to help, a woman who is stealing things from a supermarket. Reinette is horrified when she learns of Mirabelle's attitude toward this theft, then has some odd encounters of her own in a railway station with a panhandler and a con woman (not really a hustler in our sense). Again, a surprise finish.

"Selling the Picture" starts with the sophisticated Mirabelle as she teases the voluble Reinette for talking too much. Reinette bets that she can keep from speaking for a whole day. As it turns out, this is the day she must show a picture of hers to an art dealer. Still again, the episode has the lineaments of a refined skit.

In each of these episodes Rohmer takes time to enjoy the nuances of the moment, the small contradictions and surprises of dailiness. He never gives us the feeling of feverishly building to a payoff, of chucking as he puts the pieces in place for the finish; thus the finish seems part of the body of the piece, not a mere tag.

All of the episodes, like all of Rohmer's films, are built on faith—a faith that may have its origins in the divine but is so concentrated on the worldly that it seems sheer optimism. All is eventually for the best in Rohmer's world. Rebuff, travail, disappointment are all recompensed fully. But the recompense is so firmly entwined in Rohmer's credo that it is inevitable for him, the fulfillment of his character, and nearly as wry as it is happy: so it's never syrupy.

The two young women, Miquel and Jessica Forde, are true instances of Rohmer casting. When we first see them, we can hardly believe that they are going to play principal roles, less because they are not conventionally attractive than because they both seem on their way somewhere else, pausing only to be in this picture because the camera is there. But Rohmer finds ways to stimulate them while keeping them at their non-professional ease—a considerable feat—and finds attractions in them that we had not foreseen. They can hardly be called first-class actors, but (especially if the claim about improvisation is true) they have imagination and aplomb.

A Tale of Springtime, Éric Rohmer, 1990 (*The New Republic*, 31 August 1992)

Éric Rohmer is a minimalist but of a peculiar kind. Minimalism, let's say, is a method of understatement, of implication in extremis, opposed to explication in any sense. Rohmer's cinematic methods—his framing, his editing within a scene, his ellipses between scenes—are all brilliantly minimalist; but the décor of any one shot is intensely detailed, and the dialogue of his screenplays is disquisitional. Two people who have recently met can talk for three or four minutes about their feelings for each other, as they do in his latest film, then kiss, then talk for another three or four minutes about that one kiss. The action is spare; the texture of the discourse around it is neo-Cartesian. It's enjoyable.

A Tale of Springtime, Rohmer's latest, is the first of a new series. The first and best series was *Six Moral Tales*: *My Night at Maud's* (1969) and *Claire's Knee* (1970) are among these films made from 1963 to 1972. Then came the six films of the *Comedies and Proverbs* series, from 1981 to 1987. (Between those two series came the masterly *The Marquise of O . . .* [1976].) His new film launches a new series: *Tales of the Four Seasons*. It's hard to see how some of these films couldn't

have been in the other series, but if this taxonomy is useful to Rohmer, that's enough.

Paris again. And again Rohmer enjoys the way that commonplace events can lead to odd situations. A philosophy teacher in her late twenties, played by Anne Teyssèdre, goes to a party and there meets a music student some ten years younger, Florence Darel. The two converse because they are both bored at the party. Darel invites Teyssèdre back to the flat she shares with her father, who is rarely there, and the two women, though of differing maturity, become friendly and frank with each other.

The story then takes them to Darel's country place and to an encounter with her father, Hugues Quester, and his lover, Eloise Bennett. Darel hates Bennett, and she arranges matters, when the chance arises, so that Teyssèdre and her father are left alone together, hoping that her new friend may replace Bennett. Also involved in the story are four other people, only one of whom is seen: Darel's (divorced) mother, Teyssèdre's lover, Darel's lover, and Bennett's other lover. A missing necklace is also involved as another counter in a game of suspicion and accident, of sexual and temperamental interplay, of the limitations of candor.

It would be straining to try to infer a realized theme from this film—or, for that matter, from its title. Its rewards are in the grave simplicity with which Rohmer has directed it and in the quality of the conversation. (A slight touch of bravura here. Teyssèdre drops a reference to Gyges's ring, from Book Two of Plato's *Republic*, and this is certainly the only screenplay in world film history to use the word "maieutic.")

Rohmer's cast is acutely selected. Partly because they are unfamiliar—true of most people in his latter-day films—they seem to be non-actors who have been chosen for personal aptness rather than for acting talent. They are not maladroit and may, for all I know, be celebrated in France; but they give this film a suggestion of disclosed privacy rather than of created art. This, added to Rohmer's cinematic asceticism, has a wry result: even when his films aren't overwhelmingly interesting, they have some interest.

A Tale of Winter, Éric Rohmer, 1992 (*The New Republic*, 9 May 1994)

We're lucky that Éric Rohmer is French. His cultural lineage—Marivaux, Laclos, and Musset are some of his ancestors—enables him to anatomize the fluctuations of love with the gravity of a physicist splitting molecules. Rohmer has made one emotionally large-scale film, *The Marquise of O* . . . (1976), but in the usual Rohmer scale, a touch of a girl's knee (*Claire's Knee*, 1970) or a long man-woman philosophical discussion (*My Night at Maud's*, 1969) is climactic. No filmmaker is easier to satirize, but none so easily survives satire: for, besides his sheer cinematic wizardry, his insistence on magnifying fibrillations persuades us that the motto is right—God is in the details. Rohmer's films (almost) always hold us in themselves, but even if interest in the dialogue flags slightly, his fierce sincerity cows us.

His latest, *A Tale of Win*ter, is the second in a new series called *Tales of the Four Seasons*. (He likes to present his films in series, though the linkage is not always clear.) To sketch the story is to show yet again that Rohmer is more concerned with emotional analysis than emotional storm. Félicie and Charles have a passionate affair at a beach one summer. They part, intending to re-meet, but

she accidentally gives him the wrong address. Five years later, in Paris, she has a small daughter, fruit of the affair, lives with a librarian named Loïc, works in a beauty salon, moves to Nevers with her boss, Maxence, when he opens a salon there, stays only a short time, and returns to Paris where Loïc wants her again. She can't decide: the memory of Charles, the one man she loved completely, still haunts all her amorous decisions.

At this point we are torn. Like normal human beings, we want her to find Charles and be happy; but like seasoned filmgoers, we are wary of a contrived happy ending. Rohmer, with typical courage, comforts our schism—both parts.

Most of the film takes place between Christmas and New Year's and focuses, with traditional Gallic calibration, on Félicie's dilemmas of choice—Maxence or Loïc or no one, all under the specter of Charles. Rohmer makes us care because he makes us see that life doesn't consist of dramatic peaks but of dramatic continuum, day by day, almost hour by hour. To him, everyone's life is a pilgrim's progress, and all that is needed to make it interesting is perception.

Religion flutters along the edge of Félicie's problems: she gets some sort of clarification when she takes her daughter to see a Christmas crèche in a cathedral (and Loïc doesn't miss the chance to restate an old Rohmer theme, Pascal's wager). However, the resolution is not divine but Shakespearian. Toward the end Loïc takes Félicie to see a performance of *The Winter's Tale*, and the "miracle" in the close of that play prefigures the "miracle" in Félicie's life. (Rohmer says that a chance viewing of the play on TV started his thinking about this film.)

Rohmer has learned a lot from his cinematic forebear, Robert Bresson—in no way more than in his dealings with actors. As did Bresson, he spends much time with his principal people before he begins work, in order to learn about them (he rarely uses the same actors twice), and he encourages both their suggestions and improvisations. This approach—"anti-theater," let's call it—has limitations, and he knows it. In *The Marquise of O . . .* , he used first-rank theater actors and let them rip. But here, especially with the Shakespeare scene as contrast, he makes the conversational charismatic. He creates a tacitly persistent reality that makes us feel as if we could walk around behind the actors and never get "backstage." Charlotte Véry (Félicie), Frédéric Van Den Driessche (Charles), Hervé Furic (Loïc), and Michel Voletti (Maxence) are all paradoxical. We don't know beforehand what we expect of them: we find out, as they supply it.

A visual note. Almost all of Rohmer's films have been pictorially intricate. The very textiles on furniture have been part of the scheme. Here Rohmer has paid less attention than usual to light and texture. Nothing is crude; nothing is visually remarkable. The cinematographer, Luc Pagès, presumably did what the director asked of him. Apparently, this time Rohmer wanted his film to look as daringly "daily" as his subject.

The Mattei Affair, Francesco Rosi, 1972 (*The New Republic*, 2 June 1973)

Francesco Rosi's new film, *The Mattei Affair*, isn't going to turn the trick for him in the United States. Rosi is a director of stunning ability and genuine seriousness, with strong (though not unique) interests: he explores actual events, through fictional re-creation, as social phenomena (like Costa-Gavras and others). His first film seen here was *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), about the Sicilian bandit: a

flawed picture but with a rough, catching fabric, with a purposive feel and a fine graphic sense. Of his later films, not all shown in the U.S., the only one I have seen until now is *The Moment of Truth* (1965), made in Spain, a cruel-compassionate study of what bullfighting means as escape-hatch for poor boys. At present he is making a film about Lucky Luciano, and in New York lately, where he came to shoot some scenes for it, he said with a laugh, "Unfortunately not a real gangster picture."

The Mattei Affair is concerned with the forces *under* events: this time the story of Enrico Mattei, the Italian oil executive who died in a plane crash—probably murdered—in1962. Mattei had prescience about what it's now modish to call the energy crisis, had a clear vision of the importance of oil in politics; and his activities in Italy and abroad ran counter to those of the big oil companies of the world. He was a rationalist, a nationalist, and an internationalist, unconcerned with exploitation. His death was a convenience for the exploiters.

It was a natural theme for Rosi and, sheerly in filmmaking terms, he handles it comfortably. But skillfully though it is composed and edited, intelligently though it proceeds, its affective power is weak. We *see* what Mattei is about, we understand his aims, we recognize his enemies; but the heat of his struggle never touches us. The film is deft (but mere) exposition of a problem.

Costa-Gavras, who is comparable, takes a much more externalized subject in *State of Siege* (1972) and keeps us gripped with guns and kidnapping; this is a crime story and, not to derogate Costa-Gavras for his choice of subject, he has easier materials to work with than Rosi had. I wish Rosi had succeeded with his subtler sociopolitical drama. I'm afraid he hasn't. But he whets my appetite for the Luciano film.

***Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Francesco Rosi, 1979 (*The New Republic*, 19 April 1980)**

It's getting a bit late to worry about Francesco Rosi. He's been directing since 1958, and the balance in him of virtues and faults, too equal to keep him from first-class work, hasn't yet tipped favorably. If anything, the reverse.

Rosi is Neapolitan, "political," and marks his films with a humane, cursive gravity. He's concerned with the well- being of his countrymen, with the plots and complots that oppress them; his camera moves to disclose and unravel the conspiracies against justice, glides succinctly and discreetly, in such films as *The Mattei Affair* (about oil), from 1972, and *Lucky Luciano* (about the Mafia), from 1974. His early and, I think, best film, *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), was a "ballad" about the Sicilian bandit as an emblem of protest, and many of its images are incised in memory—the massacre at the communist rally, the naked corpse of Giuliano packed in ice against the Sicilian summer. (And let's not forget that the cinematographer who perfected those images was the late Gianni Di Venanzo, who died in 1966 at the age of forty-six: an inadequately recognized force in the postwar Italian film rebirth.) But in that work and later ones, Rosi's structure has been weak, his drama flabby. He relies on texture to do almost everything for him, and it doesn't. (It's odd, this failing, because he began as assistant to Luchino Visconti, whose dramatic sense leaned the other way, to the florid. Has Rosi been overreacting to Visconti all through his own career?)

Now Rosi has filmed a subject that, I'd guess, he has had in mind for a long time, but he hasn't re-examined it in the light of lapsed time, with enough rigor. One of the most famous of postwar Italian books was Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. Levi was a physician and painter, an anti-Fascist who in the 1930s had been exiled from Rome to Lucania in southern Italy along with other "politicals," and who wrote about the experience ten years later. The story is not of Levi's sufferings, for in any real sense he didn't suffer. When we think of political dissidents under Hitler and Stalin in those years, Levi and his fellow anti-Fascists seem just to be on faintly spartan holidays in an exquisite countryside.

However, not much claim is made about his suffering. Levi's real subject is the Lucanian peasantry, his countrymen whose lives were straitened in every regard. But they and their villages strike us differently today. When Gian Maria Volonté, as Levi, speaks on the soundtrack about the desolation, the misery, the abandonment of these people. I thought that he ought to be glad he never saw the South Bronx or many parts of Harlem. More: I saw *Christ Stopped at Eboli* just after a documentary on ABC-TV about Cambodia today.

Not that misery must be the most miserable in our experience in order to be moving. The life of a Lucanian peasant even now, I'm sure, is harder than most of us will ever know (although the worst we actually see here are some superstitions about illness). Compare *Eboli* only with Olmi's *Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978). Rosi's film is the notebook of a tourist, compassionate but safe. Olmi's film fell sadly short of success, but we lived with the peasants, were surrounded by the hardness of their lives. Levi was a visitor, judging by the difference between Lucanian life and that in Rome. Olmi never patronized his people; Levi, as drawn by Rosi, can't quite escape the scent of tourism.

And the tour plods, episode after episode, an invertebrate travelogue. Rosi attempts to give it a semi-spine with a (non-sexual) relationship between Levi and his housekeeper. Irene Papas fills the part with her dark juices, but she simply appears for a while, then disappears. The episode is one more brick not cemented into place. Volonté, saturnine and strong, does what he can as Levi, but there's not enough for him to do.

Always Rosi wants to cut against conventional filmmaking, which is admirable, but all that he replaces conventional structure with is flaccidness. That's often been true of him, and here it's worse because he hasn't seen what his material looks like today. Levi's book is generally credited with being in the van of postwar Italian social realism. That—in the days when Liberation still hung in the air, the days when presumably Rosi first read and loved the book—was a while ago.

***The Truce*, Francesco Rosi, 1997 (*The New Republic*, 11 May 1998)**

For Primo Levi, the peace after World War II was only an armistice—before the next war began. His memoir that described his postwar homeward journey from Auschwitz to Turin was called *The Truce* (1974). In 1981, thirty-six years after the war's end, this former partisan wrote a poem called "Partisan." The first line: "Where are you now, partisans of all the valleys?" The poem goes on to say that they must be on guard against the enemy:

What enemy? Every man is the enemy
of every other,
With everyone split by an inner border,
The right hand enemy of the left.
On your feet, old men,
enemies of yourselves:
Our war is never over.

Clearly Levi had come to believe that the rooted threat against peace was the inner state of man, that thus peace would always be a mere truce. Presumably this belief became too much for him to bear. For this reason among possible others, presumably, he took his life in 1987.

It's a serious challenge to make a film about Levi, and Francesco Rosi, always serious, always wresting large subjects, was seemingly as fit a choice for the task as any director could be. *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), *The Moment of Truth* (1965), *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1979)—not to mention *Carmen* (1984)—were not flawless, but had concepts of large scope and were grave in their tactics.

The Truce was made from an adaptation by Rosi and Tonino Guerra, Antonioni's longtime collaborator. (The version being shown in the U.S. is in English.) It opens with chilling verity, promising to be worthy of its subject; but little by little the film becomes only one more account of the horrors of the war and of the postwar period. The adventures are terrible and ironic, as Levi and some other Italian prisoners make their enforced meandering way from Poland through much of central Europe before they reach home. But the center of Levi's book is missing, the uniqueness—Levi himself.

Physically he is there, almost all the time. John Turturro plays Levi and is always sober and respectful of the man, decent and responsive as the moment demands. But, as given, this character could have been any one of other comparable men. The Levi who wrote the book—other books and poetry—about his life, about being trapped inside that life, about being as humane as possible within that entrapment, is not there. Probably he could not be.

Turturro is given some voice-over lines from Levi. (When the Auschwitz prisoners are freed: "We felt unfit for our newfound liberty.") Yet these don't compensate for the absence of the whole man through whom all the events of the book are experienced. I've lost my copy of *The Truce* (which is now available under another title, *The Reawakening*), but I've been looking again at *The Periodic Table* and am refreshed in Levi's being. To show him, as a film must do, to show his actions instead of inhabiting him, as a book allows, is to reduce him. Scores and scores of autobiographies have been filmed, but the greater the degree of interiority in the original, the thinner the film is likely to be. Here, despite all that Rosi and Turturro can do, the Levi we look at and listen to is not near the Levi we know.

Without Levi, the film is only a series of episodes that, in essence, are much like those in some past films. *The Truce* is delicately shot and edited and has some graphic minor performances, but it is inevitably disappointing.

***Summer Skin*, Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, 1961 (*The New Republic*, 18 June 1962)**

Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but, in art, it is the flattest form of sincerity. An important original note is bound to echo in other artists, but mere imitation is rarely rewarding because it begins on the surface and paws inward, a reverse process. Now come the imitations of Antonioni. Italians have already begun (e.g., Zurlini's *Girl with a Suitcase*, 1961); an Argentinian, Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, continues, with *Summer Skin*. He thinks that if one anatomizes trifles, if one simply allows large faces to be "present" on the screen, one has achieved the Antonioni style. What he lacks are: a meaningful story devoid of stale devices and fake irony; a sense of rhythm and of tension that lets him know when a "held" shot is becoming more boring or more beautiful; a philosophical ground from which all else flowers, not superficial pastiche profundity; an encompassing aesthetic that translates his life-view into affecting art.

Of this, in Torre Nilsson, nothing. He has a moderately keen eye for composition and for the arresting; he has an *ambition* to be a serious director. Not much more.

His sententiousness begins with his belief that this script—by his wife, Beatriz Guido—is serious. Essentially it is comic. Marcela is the granddaughter of a successful courtesan, still practicing. Grandma's current lover has a sick son who has a year to live. The father will give Marcela, post mortem, a year in Paris and a Dior wardrobe if she will comfort the young man's last months. She accepts. He falls in love with her; she responds. At the last the young man is miraculously cured, which surprises no one except the people in the picture. (Up to this point, as Colette would have seen, it is a comedy.) When the boy informs Marcela of his cure, however, she tells him she hates him, that all she wants now is the promised price. He shoots himself.

The dénouement is a dogged insistence on bitterness; it does not grow out of the story. Marcela's summer skin (we should say "tan") is figuratively her response to the boy's summertime ardor, which, she thinks, will fade in the autumn when he dies. But we experienced filmgoers know that she will be genuinely drawn to him. After he leaves, presumably forever, she sits lonely on the beach for days and starts up hopefully at every passing car. Then why does she burst into loathing when he reappears and tells her the good news?

Films like this—all mannerism without style, ambition without means—come often from countries where artists are without nourishing traditions and where audiences tend to overpraise the local product to prove that they are culturally equal with any other country. This is not to say that some nations are Calvinistically elect in culture and the rest are out of grace forever, but good art in any form usually comes from a country that has been working in that form for some time. The South American films we have so far seen here substantiate this view. But a Brazilian film (Anselmo Duarte's *The Payer of Promises* [1962]) has won this year's Cannes prize and may prove a harbinger of less imitative and hollow filmmaking.

Torre Nilsson wrote recently: "I feel an enormous modesty at every showing of *Summer Skin.*" This seems an appropriate response.

***Hand in the Trap*, Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, 1961 (*The New Republic*, 29 June 1963)**

The work of the Argentine director Leopoldo Torre Nilsson is sometimes quite attractive but is sooner or later disappointing. Of the five films that I have seen previously, the best was *The Fall* (1959), which touches the Henry James-William Golding-Richard Hughes theme of wickedness in children. The children were handled excellently and the film was technically impressive, but the result was thematically and dramatically vacuous. *Summer Skin* (1961) had some skill and mood, but its resolution was unconvincing. Two of the films, *The Female: Seventy Times Seven* (1962) and *The Kidnapper* (1958), become bankrupt earlier. The former is a grim triangle in near-primitive Patagonia about two rough men and an attractive young woman who, in this rugged, windy country, wears a very low-cut dress and unfailing eye makeup. In the latter film, one of the many, many dramatic highlights is a scene in which a pig eats a baby.

Now comes *Hand in the Trap*, which won the Critics' Prize at Cannes in 1961. Like Torre Nilsson's earlier *End of Innocence* (a.k.a. *The House of the Angel*, 1957), it is a story of a woman traumatized by amorous experience. A girl spends a summer with two aunts in their large house in a small town. In the attic is supposed to be a deformed, illegitimate half-brother of hers whom she has never seen. She discovers that it is really another aunt, generally believed to be in the United States, who took to the attic and living death after being jilted by a local buck who had seduced her. This buck, still quite passable, subsequently seduces the niece and establishes her in an apartment in Buenos Aires.

The Brontean overtones are no more than that. Torre Nilsson films have a certain sheen that derives from their reflections of their artistic sources, but they never have intact lives or even sense of their own. This film is filled with silly romanticizing instead of the melancholy romanticism at which it aims. Torre Nilsson has some technical talents, but he lacks the artistic intelligence to guide them. He remains a director who needs a director.

Love at Twenty, François Truffaut & others, 1962 (*The New Republic*, 9 March 1963)

Love at Twenty is yet another anthology film—five episodes dealing with its subject in five countries. The best is the first: an anecdote about a Parisian boy's unrequited first love that at least leads to friendship with the girl's parents. François Truffaut elevates the material with his seemingly unfailing poetic pyrotechnics. Renzo Rossellini's Roman episode, by contrast, is astoundingly trite and tritely handled. As for the Japanese episode, by Shintaro Ishihara, it is a boring bit of psychosis.

The Polish episode, by Andrzej Wajda, deals—as is usual in Wajda's films—with an interesting idea. (A thirtyish hero of the Resistance, still heroic, is momentarily attractive to a teenaged girl but soon becomes tiresome to her and her young friends.) As is also usual with Wajda, he handles it with leaden mittens. The German episode, deftly directed by Max Ophüls, is a cute boy-girl romance, perfectly conventional except that in this case they have the baby before they fall in love and get married.

The Green Room, François Truffaut, 1978 (*The New Republic*, 6 October 1979)

Some footage of World War I battles, tinted blue. François Truffaut's face, bewhiskered under a *poilu* helmet, weary, coming closer through the battles. The film credits, superimposed on these shots. Then a title tells us that the story we're going to see takes place in a French town about ten years after the war in which millions were killed. Then a close shot of old-fashioned lace curtains (clean, white, quiet, after the foregoing). An elderly maid crosses from left to right, quite close. Voices. She returns from right to left, leading in Truffaut in civilian clothes.

What simplicity. What control. This opening is typical of the way that Truffaut has made all of *The Green Room*, and it confirms—reconfirms, as the airlines say—that there is no more fluent filmmaker working today. By now he has such ease and confidence that he seems almost a little ashamed of talent, as if the display of talent were a distraction—and this in spite of the fact that he himself is on the screen nearly the whole time in the leading role. The making of this picture is so reticently accomplished (there's one irrelevant iris shot as a Truffaut trademark), the recurrent lateral movements so gently encourage the flow and engagement, the angles and discoveries are so discreet, the performances are so keyed to dignified intimacy—and Nestor Almendros's cinematography is so well up to his usual excellence—that for the first hour or so, all is pleasure. That's about when unease begins to wear through.

The trouble with *The Green Room* is not like that in Fassbinder's *Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979). With Fassbinder, some good acting and directing were expended on a finally incomprehensible script. Truffaut's script, written with his old collaborator Jean Gruault, is perfectly comprehensible—but it's unrewarding. In fact, though it's intended to be poetically mystic, it becomes faintly repellent. The screenplay is "based on themes from Henry James," principally from "The Altar of the Dead," with some chordal support from "The Beast in the Jungle." (I'd have preferred the emphasis the other way 'round.) The theme, here enacted by a shaken ex-soldier, is of a life spent in love of the dead, in trying to live with the dead; and it degenerates from the spiritual into the obsessive, neurotic, sickly. The real destiny, the emotionally logical destiny, for this James-Truffaut hero is not faced: it's the one that Faulkner gives to his protagonist in the best treatment of this macabre subject, "A Rose for Emily"—literally to sleep with the skeleton of the dead beloved.

The film wants to move toward an exaltation of purity, of fidelity beyond the flesh, in which the hero is eventually joined by a young woman (Nathalie Baye) who at first resists his ideas. But it's more like a disease that he finally gives her. Everything that color and editing and music can do to help the idea as poem and anguish is done; but it comes out necrophilia. (Truffaut's one deviation from seriousness is in the pictures on the walls of the chapel that his hero builds for his dead. If these are all friends whose deaths "live" with him, then why pictures of James himself, Proust, Wilde, Oskar Werner in his *Jules and Jim* [1962] uniform? Why Cocteau, who was still very much alive at the time of the story? It's all out of kilter, a touch of Truffaut's 1950s high jinks.)

It was a mistake, I think, for Truffaut to play the hero. (Whom he makes a journalist. As he showed in the Antoine Doinel films, Truffaut likes to fantasize about working in a newspaper/magazine office.) He's credible enough in what he says and does, though his face is not aging attractively, but he cannot supply the

unspoken that the role should have. Charles Denner in the part, or Jean-Claude Brialy or Maurice Ronet, would not have made the film a success but would at least have taken it below the phenomenal to the implicit.

Still it's interesting that Truffaut chose this subject: paradoxically, it shows both his range and his circumscription. It's a new subject, yet in a way it's more about the same dark strands that have persisted in his only partially lyrical work. In many of his films, death and aberration are just below the surface of the charm. Here they are not buried at all; they are the focus. The hero, smitten by the war he survived, by the guilt he feels in his survival, can think of little other than death, particularly of his dead wife. It's Truffaut's frankest address so far to the shadows that haunt his work, but, despite its quietly superb execution, it comes out dank.

Confidentially Yours, François Truffaut, 1983 (*The New Republic*, 20 February 1984)

A prolific and highly personal director has also made a black-and-white film that is, in good part, a tribute to a director and a school he worships. *Confidentially Yours*, François Truffaut's latest, is based on an American thriller, as were four of his previous films; and once again Truffaut is paying idiosyncratic homage to Hitchcock and to American *film noir*. (Hence the black and white, comfortably handled by Nestor Almendros.)

Set in a city near Nice, it's one more story of an unjustly accused man trying to prove his innocence of murder, a task complicated by more murders. His one aide is an attractive secretary whom he fired just before the storm broke. The plot is complete with diligent cops, cagey private eyes, sleazy nightclubs, and a panel that reveals a hidden room. The prime requirement here, obviously, is not credibility but entertainment. The only question is: Does the time past unnoticeably?

No. The story is insufficiently clever, the people are insufficiently engaging. As the accused, Jean-Louis Trintignant is weak in comedy, which this bloody plot requires. As the loyal secretary, Fanny Ardant, first seen in and as *The Woman Next Door* (1981), is less fascinating to at least some others than she patently is to Truffaut. She is a passable actress but not the overwhelming sex symbol that the director apparently thinks her. She has such a firm-jawed face that, at certain angles, she looks like a transvestite.

This is one of those discomforting films where we feel the director getting more pleasure than ourselves. Truffaut says, in the publicity, that he was "seduced" by Ardant's looks. Truffaut, believe it or not, is now fifty-two. *Confidentially Yours* is not much more than an invitation to watch a middle-aged man showing off for and with his new crush.

Films in Focus

Mr. Arkadin, Orson Welles, 1955 (*The New Republic*, 8 October 1962)

Orson Welles made *Mr. Arkadin* abroad in 1955; it was shown there as *Confidential Report*, but it has not had theatrical distribution in the United States until now. It does little to resolve the contradictions of his career.

The script—by Welles—is Eric Ambler parody, unintentional. One of those mystery millionaires of Europe is amnesiac about the first twenty years of his life, and he hires an American roustabout, who is wooing his daughter, to search out his beginnings. Suspense stories of this kind are supposed to travel on rails of cynical worldliness, impelled by murder, with waystops of bizarre character. But Welles's dialogue is so ludicrously gnomic, the motivations so abrupt, the atmosphere so vacuously portentous, that the film is never either scary or moving. It was photographed all over Europe with the avidity for color of the American expatriate who wants to show the stay-at-homes how acclimated he is to Old World byways and blasé wickedness.

The post-recorded soundtrack, partially dubbed by some who are not in the cast, is execrable. Playing Arkadin, Welles figuratively smells of greasepaint and spirit gum as his wig line, beard line, and putty nose shriek for attention. Robert Arden, the American, is the most dubious of Welles's several dubious discoveries. Michael Redgrave plays an eccentric Polish pawnbroker with heavy stress on all three components. Having said that, I note that Katina Paxinou gives her usual good performance and Akim Tamiroff his unusually good one.

More importantly, every foot of the film was shot with a dramatic vigor and the whole work composed with visual ingenuity. Welles has a gigantic gift for telling stories excitingly with the camera; but here, as on other occasions, he wastes it on inferior stuff. (On two *other* occasions he distorted *Macbeth* [1948] and *Othello* [1952].) *Mr. Arkadin* thus proves yet again that the creative and the editorial gift are not always present simultaneously.

Gervaise, René Clément, 1956 (*The Reporter*, 23 January 1958)

The compliment one can pay the new French film *Gervaise* is to say that it represents faithfully the novel on which it is based. The usual movie made from a novel, like the recent film of *Nana* (Christian-Jaque, 1955), is generally a grab bag; the producer takes from the book what he thinks will fit his stars or his conception of assured popularity. This isn't true of the producer (Annie Dorfmann), the director (René Clément), and the screenwriters (Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost) of *Gervaise.* Their purpose has been simply to render a novel as film. Limited only by the inflexible differences between the two media, they have succeeded.

L'Assommoir, it will be remembered, is a cornerstone in Zola's immense Rougon-Macquart cycle of twenty novels. It was one of the first Zola novels—it was published in 1877—to achieve wide popularity. An American translation (under the title *Gervaise*, incidentally) appeared only two years later and was made from the sixtieth French edition. The book tells the story of Gervaise Macquart, a cripple from the south of France who comes to Paris with her lover and their two sons, works hard to support them all, is deserted by the lover, marries a roof mender by whom she has a daughter (Nana), and then has to

support him, too, after he is injured in a fall. She opens a laundry shop, but her husband's drinking—encouraged by her lover, who returns and is welcomed into the house by the husband—brings about their eventual ruin. In the end the husband dies raving in a madhouse, the sons are scattered, Nana is gaily embarked on her own story, and Gervaise, her hope crushed, dies drunk and alone. Though it sounds austere, Angus Wilson has called this Zola's most compassionate work.

The book is in the film. The last quarter of the novel is drastically condensed but the spirit of it is not violated; instead of protracting the husband's delirious disintegration, Gervaise's decline, and the start of Nana's fancy career, the adapters let the first occur in the shop and clearly foreshadow the latter two. It is enough; two hours of any movie, even a refreshingly grim one, are enough. To reread the novel is to be struck by the fidelity of the film. The first view of the cheap hotel balcony, the steamy fight in the public laundry, the wedding party in the Louvre, the fall from the roof, the feast on Gervaise's saint's day—all these are in the film.

"I must show all the world trying to bring about her ruin, consciously or unconsciously," Zola wrote about his heroine in a note to the novel. As Gervaise, Maria Schell embodies the giving soul looking for a worthy receiving soul who is heartlessly used, in the short or long run, by men whose egos are unable to withstand her generosity. There is in Schell's performance perhaps an ounce too much winsomeness, but she moves us with her straightforward simple affection. (Both her performance and the film won awards at the Venice Film Festival.) The rest of the cast, notably Suzy Delair as Virginie, is always satisfactory. But the most notable triumphs of the film are those of the adapters and the director.

How to Make a World

How do the Europeans, especially the French, evoke the past so convincingly in their films? The answer cannot be simply that their sets are ready-made. Old Paris streets are available to American filmmakers as well. Part of the answer is in the actors, whose training and whose imaginations—cultivated by that training—enable them to breathe and bend in costume. Yet a larger part of the answer must lie with the directors, in this case René Clément. He has made his world. What happens to his principals in a tavern or a market place or a music hall seems only a portion of what is happening there; certain characters are in the foreground only because it is their story that has been chosen to be told. Any of the people moving around them are equally real, equally interesting, just as busily engaged in following the unraveling threads of their own lives. There are no dress extras in this picture.

Clément also has a gift for unfolding a large scene from a small beginning. The scene that ends with the husband's wild, obscene smashing of the laundry begins with a close-up of little Nana looking through a glass that is about to be heated and affixed to her ailing father's back. The effect is one of slipping through a quiet keyhole into a gradually revealed house full of hell.

The squeamish may at first object to the blatancy of the husband's bloodied back (when his delirium topples him against the wall with cupping glasses on him), of a vomit-spattered bed, of nose-picking. But that objection will not hold against the director; these things are true to the spirit of the book. For at almost every point the film is strapped to the book; you cannot tug at the former without

the latter.

Here the reward of virtue is that the film's faults are Zola's faults. For all its excellences of acting, editing, photography, and direction, the picture leaves us with a feeling of pointlessness. We have watched a simple, hard-working woman beaten down by a clever, opportunistic lover whom she cannot resist, by a weak husband who turns to drink, by ceaseless toil, and by whimsical fate. It is not tragic; it is simply grinding. We are neither enlightened sociologically nor harrowed by her experience. As to the former, Zola's theories are cold, his revelations stale. His theory of scientific determinism may have been a valuable ingredient in the intellectual ferment of the Third Republic, but we now know enough about slums and poverty to understand that we must fight ceaselessly to eliminate them, and must not expect human character to be notably improved thereby.

We are not moved tragically by the heroine's fall because we are too conscious that she is a clinical example. "It is surely a lesson in morality," wrote Zola in his preface to the novel. Indeed, in the scene of the soiled bed he writes: "And this was the outcome of Drink, this was an example of the results of the passion for strong liquor; Man degraded to bestiality." In the film as in the book, the author, standing at the side with blackboard pointer, vitiates his own work as art. It is a slice of life, and we feel that the knife might have gone into any one of a million specimens.

If all this is true, why isn't Zola's film (for such it is) at the level of a franker soap opera of the nineteenth century? For the hallmark of soap opera is continual woe heaped on the unremittingly virtuous. What prevents *Gervaise* from being merely *Nana's Mama, or Too Poor to Be Sober*? There are, I think, two factors that keep us from being bored or from sniggering. The first is the titanic intensity of the mind that assembled these materials and is pointing this moral. His purpose may be didactic, but his perceptions, his sympathies, his energies, his instinct for architecture are enormous. His theories seem foolish, but Zola makes himself felt despite them. The second factor is the result of the first: we find ourselves touched by a work written in anger at the obstacles men put in the road of their own perfectibility. In our world of more moderate expectations, we are moved, nostalgically, by the fire of a man to whom the farthest horizon was at once limitless and attainable.

***The Brothers Karamazov*, Richard Brooks, 1958 (*The Reporter*, 3 April 1958)**

The only sensible way to approach a film made from a gigantic work like *The Brothers Karamazov* is with good wishes and moderate hopes. Obviously, the matter of length alone prevents a film from encompassing this novel with anything like completeness. The tests one may reasonably expect such a picture to meet are: does it present an acceptable microcosm of Dostoevsky's universe, and is the presentation itself satisfactory?

On both scores the new MGM color production, directed by Richard Brooks and produced by Pandro S. Berman, deserves considerable praise. Brooks, who published several novels before devoting himself to film work, has written his own screenplay from an adaptation by the well-known playwrights

Julius J. and Philip G. Epstein. As might be foreseen, the script is principally devoted to the more easily externalized encounters and conflicts in the novel: Dmitri's love relationships, his father's debauchery, the murder, and the trial. Much of Dostoevsky's dialogue (in Constance Garnett's translation) has been retained, and within the scope of these episodes an honest and intelligent effort has been made to develop the characters in depth.

In the matter of presentation, the picture has been handsomely mounted and beautifully costumed. The interiors, particularly that of the Karamazov house, give exactly the right atmosphere of cultural frontiersmen, of a people rich in talents, avid for experience, belatedly joining the course of Western culture. There is a fairly close parallel (as Edmund Wilson, among others, has pointed out) between nineteenth-century Russia and nineteenth-century America *vis-à-vis* western Europe. In the picture the streets of Ryevsk rightly remind us of a raw Kansas town; the cloying luxury of the Karamazov home might, in essence, be that of any Midwestern robber baron's mansion.

Beyond this, and much more important, several of the performances are fine. As the elder Karamazov, Lee J. Cobb triumphs. In recent film and television performances, Cobb has seemed to trade heavily on a kind of ostentatious honesty, a conscious air of abandonment of trickery, which in itself is an affectation. In Karamazov, Cobb has discarded a theory about acting in order to act. He has used empathy and imagination, and the result is a valid, valuable artistic creation.

It is true, of course, that he has the best "part" in the book. Audiences always respond to an intelligent scoundrel. But it is easy for a performance of Karamazov to dissolve in a welter of bombast. Cobb gives us this gross character with subtlety: the feral cunning, the sudden fears, the surprising perceptions. It is a graphic portrait of a huge glutton, greedy for self-gratification and power and equally greedy for respect and love and salvation.

Yul Brynner, whose background includes considerable training in the French theater, shows the benefits of that training in a well-sustained and sensitive performance as the eldest son, Dmitri. One quickly forgives him his silly baldpate trademark as he shows us the schizoid torment of this man torn between his heredity and his vision, who can find a measure of peace only by accepting moral responsibility for a crime he did not commit. Brynner's face does as much to create the right ambience for the picture as any other factor; his repose and silences tell as much as his outbursts.

Claire Bloom, as Katya, delineates crisply an upper-class girl whose conventionality is not only her code but her burden and her weapon. (It is true that she offers herself to Dmitri in return for a crucial loan to her father; but she falls in love with him because he does "the decent thing.") We feel her straining at the bonds of her upbringing to reach Dmitri, and we understand the outrage of her little soul when her seeming generosity toward Grushenka is spurned.

But in spite of all the virtues cited above, one leaves the film with a sense of disappointment. Part of this is due to the shortcomings of the script. One is prepared for some tailoring of the ending, for, in plot though not in theme, the novel is notoriously indeterminate. But Brooks has felt it necessary to show Dmitri escaping with Grushenka and even interrupting his flight to visit the bedside of the dying boy Ilyusha, to have Ivan discover God on the witness stand and to have him snub Katya at the close. (Presumably MGM is punishing her for having helped to convict Dmitri.) These seem excessive concessions to popular sentimentality

and theatrical neatness. Beyond this, although it is remarkable to hear any serious mention in a Hollywood film of such matters as the nature of sin, the effect of religious belief on ethics, and the shape of a national soul, these themes are treated with the breathless haste of a television adaptation. To take the love and murder elements so far out of their social and religious context is to synopsize, not to condense. One does not expect to find the whole "Russian Monk" section in the film or to hear Ivan tell the story of the Grand Inquisitor, but—to cite three examples—the skimpiness of the Father Zossima and Snegiryov episodes and the *reductio ad absurdum* of Ivan's philosophy make us conscious of surgery, not Dostoevsky.

Apart from various defects in the script, the production makes use of blatantly symbolic lighting. Characters step out of amber into green at patly appropriate moments; beds are bathed in purple. In fact (as in the recent *A Farewell to Arms* [1957]), stagy lighting effects sometimes interfere with scenes that might otherwise be credible. One more point about the direction: there are a number of wild parties in the picture, tiresome because the handling of them is predictable. Although these scenes may be accurate enough, they remain clichés.

Yet even with the same script, the same lighting and editing, this film could have been much more successful if four of the leading roles had been well played. Maria Schell, in my view, is rapidly becoming the most overrated actress of our time. As Grushenka, she grins or she does not grin; there isn't a great deal more to her performance. Here, in this Slavic Carmen, the author has given us a marvelous portrait of a woman whose being is in her passions, who will live for them only, without pity for herself or anyone else: shrewd, defiant, fatalistic. Schell has the color and fire of an Alpine milkmaid. Her Grushenka simply does not flame; and without an enthralling Grushenka the plot lacks a fulcrum.

Richard Basehart paws ineffectually at the exterior of Ivan, the articulate atheist; the net effect is simply of a pleasant young man pinching his eyebrows together to indicate deep thought and inner turmoil. As Alyosha, the young embodiment of Russian mystic fervor, William Shatner is a nullity; his bland face and voice contradict everything he says and does. As Smerdyakov, the Caliban in the house, Albert Salmi concentrates so thoroughly on superficial melodramatics that he evokes little true horror. With competent performances in these three parts, in addition to Schell's, we would not only be more moved, we would—in spite of the truncations—understand more of the author's underlying meanings.

After Dostoevsky's death, Tolstoy wrote: "I never saw this man and never had any direct relations with him, and suddenly, when he died, I understood that he was the closest, dearest, and most necessary man to me." It is what one feels after reading this monumental book—that the author was a redeemer in art who was born and suffered that men might be, at least to the limits of his experience, further exalted. Buried somewhere among the good and bad things in this film is a vague, fumbling hint that this might be true. But the inadequacies block the channel, and what is "most necessary" never quite reaches and rewards us.

***Black Orpheus*, Marcel Camus, 1959 (*The New Republic*, 4 January 1960)**

It is obvious—once you see it done—that dance is a felicitous method for

film storytelling. A form that *is* motion belongs in motion pictures. This was clear to Marcel Camus, one of the New Wave of French directors, who, at age forty-seven, is the Ancient of that group. His *Black Orpheus*, winner of the Cannes Golden Palm, although it is ostensibly acted in a conventional way, is in essence a danced film. Those who saw this in *Modern Times* (1936)—in which every movement, every gesture was molded rhythmically by Chaplin, who always dances, and by Paulette Goddard, who seemed never to touch her heels to the ground—will recognize it here. The basic concept of Camus's film is the idea (in the Platonic sense) of movement.

Because the picture's background is the annual carnival in Rio de Janeiro and because the story deals with the blacks of that city, to whom dance is as natural as song-speech is to orthodox Jews, there is also a great deal of formal dancing of many kinds: cha-cha or samba or improvisation. But this only sets the outward seal on a film that, when it is dealing with the daily life, with the flirtations and fears of its characters, couches them in super-natural, musically attuned motion.

The use of the Rio carnival as a setting is excellent, though not completely original. (If memory serves, Orson Welles was making a carnival film there about fifteen years ago when he was discharged by the new management at RKO and the film was shelved.) An entire city in rhapsody is a provocative environment for a picture; in it Camus has placed a modern version of an old legend. The two leading characters are named, with disarming straightforwardness, Orpheus and Eurydice. The legend is distorted: the bulk of the picture deals with their courtship and love and only in the vaguest way touches on the most important part of the legend—the chance to restore the dead girl. In straining for the atmosphere of myth, the script scants motivation (why is the character in the Death costume pursuing Eurydice?) and forces in a pat way the death of the hero.

But, despite this strain, despite adduced poetical touches, the film is often beautiful, a swirl of color and music and movement almost from first to last. The story is simply an excuse for the presentation of the milieu. The cast is all-black, most of them Brazilian non-professionals; Orpheus is a local football player. The only foreigner is the Eurydice, Marpessa Dawn, a beautiful American dancer.

None of the acting, finally, is worth discussion and the Eastmancolor is, as usual, somewhat below Technicolor quality; but the picture is worth seeing. The effect is of visual music.

The L-Shaped Room, Bryan Forbes, 1962 (*The New Republic*, 8 June 1963)

Bryan Forbes seems unable to make up his mind. This gifted Englishman, an actor turned screenwriter, producer, and director, is interested in serious materials or at least in the idea of doing serious work (by "serious" I obviously don't mean "non-comic"), but he seems to have a shopgirl streak in his soul. There is always an element of merchandise in his films. *The Angry Silence* (1960), which he wrote and co-produced, had a timely subject: a working man questioning the conformities of unionism; but it was vitiated by some silly melodramatics. He adapted *Only Two Can Play* (1962) from a Kingsley Amis novel; but he blotched its good character-comedy with some mechanical Bob Hope gags.

Now he presents his second directorial job, *The L-Shaped Room*, with his

own screenplay, adapted from a novel by Lynne Reid Banks, and again much that is truthful in it is derogated by splashes of spurious showmanship. A French girl in London takes a top-floor room in a cheap lodging house, where she waits out her pregnancy to have an illegitimate child. In the plyboard elbow of her room is another room occupied by a West Indian black; on the floor below lives a struggling young writer; on the ground floor is a retired music-hall actress; in the basement are a couple of tarts. She becomes fast friends with them all and falls in love with the writer. They have an affair that splits when he learns that she was pregnant when they met; he is reconciled temporarily but, at the last, cannot accept another man's child. She goes back to France with her baby.

There are many attractive elements in the film, highest among which is Leslie Caron's touching and sometimes fierce performance as the girl. Yet, paradoxically, her presence in the film is its first weakness. The novel was about an English girl, but, quite apart from comparison with the original, the character of this French girl simply is not credible. It is a wry joke in England that French girls come over to have their babies for free on the National Health Service, but here is an enchanting French girl who, we are told, comes over to England to have her first lover! At the age of twenty-seven! The reasons she adduces—parental primness and so on—ring quite false (which is not to say there are no prim French parents). Credibility has been strained to accommodate Caron and to provide the film with a star.

All through the script there is ambivalence. The dialogue swings between liberally profane zest and soppiness, like the whore's story of the Yank soldier who started her off or the old actress's theatrical-reminiscence corn. The plot swings between hard straightforwardness and expediency. The black is obviously meant to have fallen in love with the girl, but this is transmuted to moral disapproval of her affair; and, toward the end, this important character is allowed to disappear, to avoid resolving his story. In terms of inner dynamics, the film really finishes when the girl escapes a miscarriage and the writer, remorseful, is reconciled to her pregnancy. But a happy ending and moral approbation are not wanted, so the plot is padded to give the hero time enough to change his mind again.

Forbes's direction, too, is markedly insecure. Passionate and humorous passages alternate with stale or stilted effects: the repeated device of having the girl run happily toward the camera only to be disappointed by something so that her face falls; silly byplay with a tin of Colman's Mustard (the writer's name is Colman); a trite Christmas celebration out of *The Entertainer* (film, 1960) and a dozen other stuffy-parlor parties; a beatnik nightclub sequence so dismally unoriginal that it even ends with a close-up of a trumpet bell to black out the scene. For his score, Forbes has used an arrangement of the first Brahms piano concerto, which is some tons too heavy for the material and comes avalanching in whenever love or loneliness is mentioned. (Except when a chorus trills "Silent Night" at the hospital.)

The bad moments in this film are in almost schizoid contrast with the good scenes, like many of the episodes between the lovers or the meeting of the girl and her ex-lover. And the chic veneer of sexual frankness does not cover up the cracks. This oscillation between the true and the trumpery leaves the picture without point. It starts as the story of a girl determined to have her child, not in expiation but to fulfill her experience and herself; it ends with her becoming a punching bag for the hero's emotional gymnastics and a *raisonneuse* for the other characters'

confessions.

As the writer, Tom Bell has incisiveness, humor, and hook-nosed, lean good looks. He joins Albert Finney, Tom Courtenay, and Alan Bates in the group of forceful young actors unearthed by the decade's upheaval in British films. Brock Peters must be weary of comparison with Sidney Poitier, but he has much of the latter's power, although he does not yet have his subtlety. Cicely Courtneidge, the old musical star, is in unsurprising command of the old musical performer role, and Emlyn Williams makes a brief, nicely repulsive appearance as a slimy doctor.

Lilith, Robert Rossen, 1964 (*The New Republic*, 22 August 1964)

After a thirty-year career as screenwriter and director, much of which showed ambition and some of which showed achievement, Robert Rossen directed *The Hustler* (1961), an extraordinarily well-made film. Its faults were those of the script's Hemingwayesque imitations—trying to make the pool table a substitute for the bull or prize ring as a moral arena; but , besides the sheerly cinematic excellences he gave the picture, Rossen led Paul Newman to one of his best portrayals, gave George C. Scott his first leg up the ladder from ranting to controlled, powerful acting, and did such sleight-of-hand with Jackie Gleason that many people were convinced he had given a performance. Now Rossen has left the grimy and vernacular where he has spent so much of his career and has, surprisingly, turned to the poetically suggestive, the delicate and shadowy.

Lilith is an attempt to plunge into a half-world—the floating, distorted world of the mentally unbalanced—not for the sake of *Snake Pit* (1948) horrors but to explore meanings of reality, possibilities of compassion, emotional vulnerabilities that persist, however the context alters around them. It must be said at the outset that the film is faulty; but it is much more than head-patting to commend Rossen for (a) changing his field so completely (quite uncommon among well-known directors); (b) choosing a field so difficult and interesting; (c) achieving some success.

With Eugen Schüfftan's superb soft photography (another instance of range— Schüfftan did *The Hustler* in naturalistic tonalities) and with evocative music by Kenyon Hopkins, the film begins arrestingly, with indications, rather than the presence, of its eponymous heroine. Vincent, a young war veteran, is restless and discontent, and thinks he may find satisfaction working in the (rather elegant) mental santarium near the Maryland town in which he lives. He is taken on as an attendant and soon meets Lilith, a patient who has made a little universe of her own music, painting, secrets. The mystery and the risky fascination of the girl are quickly persuasive. Vincent falls in love with her and—against all rules and even against specific warning—has an affair with her. He discovers eventually that she is also having a lesbian affair with another inmate, that she is quite blithe about sexual conventions, general moralities, other persons—that she is an emotional glutton, egocentric, and essentially destructive.

Another young inmate, male, is also enamored of Lilith, is hopeful, is at last spurned, and commits suicide. This act shocks Lilith out of her seeming normality and reduces her to the wretched state in which we last see her, sitting on the floor, isolated in her mind, far past Ophelia. The experience has wrecked Vincent, too. He is about to wander off when he turns suddenly to the doctor and

superintendent and says, "Help me." The film freezes (a bow to Truffaut) and ends.

Rossen's script, which he derived from J. R. Salamanca's novel, thus has fascinating materials. Its small echo of Chekhov's *Ward No. 6* gives it roots, rather than a derivative quality. But despite the film's excellent texture throughout dissatisfactions mount on two scores: individual incidents and organic strength. Examples of the former: Why is there not stricter supervision of Vincent after the chief doctor suspects his infatuation? Where do the lovers' meetings take place? If in the hospital, how are they unobserved? There are arrant movie touches: Vincent's scene with the husband of an old girlfriend is trite and would add little if it weren't. A scene in which the superintendent looks for him and finds him, disconsolate, in a bar is as old a touch as the opening shot of that scene, a blonde at the bar.

In the larger view, events and motives do not flow together cumulatively, to produce cataclysm. The significance of the lesbian theme is not well developed. Lilith's shattering effect on Vincent does not grow, spear by spear. The other man is not convincingly driven over the edge; and why does his suicide wreck the arrogant Lilith? The net feeling of the film—which I do not state as fact—is as if it had come to the editing stage with certain key connective scenes un-shot and with no chance of shooting them, as if the film were assembled as well as possible out of the best materials available.

Some of this lack of cumulation is due to Warren Beatty's performance as Vincent. It was a good idea to cast the part against type, not with a sensitive plant like Anthony Perkins. But Beatty has only two facets to his acting technique: absolute concentration and understatement to the point of omission. Gabin, Belmondo, and Brando also use these methods and frequently seem to speak volumes with them. Partly this is because they have stronger personalities than Beatty, partly it is because this is not all they can do: they have their moments of fire and outburst that these prevalent quiet moments seem to be containing. Not Beatty, who is all small-scale intensity in an insufficient voice; so we are never convinced of the transition in him, that Lilith has roweled his soul inside out.

On the other hand, Jean Seberg, who is also cast against type as Lilith, is much more successful. The obvious casting would have been, say, Audrey Hepburn. Seberg's simple beauty and Midwestern accent give an almost sisterly cover under which her conscious and unconscious malevolence can work; her qualities make the mystery all the more mysterious. This is not to imply that she succeeds only by default. Seberg continues to improve as a film actress and makes some of her strokes with intelligence and feeling. But the facts of her person are a contrapuntal advantage to belief in the character.

Special mention must be made of the way Rossen and Schüfftan have treated Seberg's remarkably photogenic face. There is one scene in which she gathers her skirt above her knees, wades into a still lake, and kisses her own image, which—simply as photography—is as lovely as anything one has a right to expect in films. For her part, Anne Meacham—the "other" woman—is an actress in love with her own quivering soul. As the lover, Peter Fonda is, as usual, unimpressive. Kim Hunter is pleasant as the superintendent.

One may guess that, in Rossen's venture into a quite new sphere for him, he became less sure of his dramatic bearings or—which is another way of putting the same thing—was seduced into thinking that the poetic quality would compensate for the lack of dramatic cohesion and constant growth. Thus, for all

the film's considerable merits, it disappoints.

Lord Jim, Richard Brooks, 1965 (*The New Republic*, 13 March 1965)

Richard Brooks's version of *Lord Jim* raises the question of whether one likes films, in addition to whether one likes Conrad. Much of the picture is extraordinarily well made and Peter O'Toole's performance in the title role is touched with the poetic; but the revisions, deletions, and additions to the original have the effect of changing the subject under discussion. I am thinking only of those who know the book when I say that they may find this film enjoyable as such. Is the phrase "as such" tenable? The point seems worth exploring when a novel is an accepted classic and the film that has been derived from it has certain virtues of its own.

It seems to me hypocritically naïve to go to a film version of such a book expecting or hoping that no changes at all have been made and being shocked at discovering otherwise. All of us know that the times when the novel has not been altered or wrenched out of shape are rare. (*David Copperfield*? *Great Expectations*? *Wuthering Heights*? It would require a fresh look to make sure.) But beyond sad experience, there is the fundamental fact that, even in understanding hands, adaptation cannot mean mere reproduction. To belabor the obvious, there is the sheer matter of time: a film that included all the dialogue in an average novel would run perhaps twenty or twenty-five hours. But there is the even more fundamental fact that a novel exists in its prose; to put it into pictures—to substitute actual places and persons for places and persons that are meant to be suggested inside one's head by Conrad's words—is to put Conrad largely out of the question and to make demands on another aesthetic. Even to take the synopsized plot—intact, without rearrangement—is not really to be faithful: it is merely to extract a skeleton, which turns to rubber when it is extracted and which can be hardened into bone again only if the new, cinematic flesh that is put on it is molded by that new aesthetic.

It is purely academic to argue from the above that adaptation ought not to be attempted. The history of film is the history of adaptation, usually from novels. It is true that the best films—with rare exceptions like Pudovkin's 1926 version of Gorky's *Mother*—are original works or are liberal adaptations from inferior fiction that could only be improved by adaptation. But the amount of useful original material written for the screen has never been enough to fill it, and the attraction of certain novels has been understandably strong. As in this case. (I wonder only why *Lord Jim* has been relatively neglected; the one previous version I know of was made by Victor Fleming in 1925, in the silent days.) Besides, there is the added value of a famous title. So it is mock heroics to play Canute to the sea of adaptations.

Still, the paradox remains: one enjoys much in this film *at the same time* that one is disconcerted by the changes. But if it is fruitless to complain of changes as such or of the very practice of adaptation, how can the dissatisfaction be resolved? (Not merely by staying away if, like me, you often get various kinds of pleasure along with the dissatisfaction.) One helpful method, when a good or great book is involved, might be the recognition of a Third Force: neither the original novel nor an original film. In music there is an ancient tradition of variations on

other composers' themes, and no one complains because Brahms and Rachmaninoff have, each in his own way, been "unfaithful" to Paganini. Robert Lowell showed in *Imitations* that a related process is possible in poetry. Not to equate Brooks with these gentlemen, perhaps the same attitude could apply to this kind of film. In the most rigorously artistic view, the film has demands to be filled in faithfulness to itself; it needs to be as self-centered as any other art. Anything else leads to adaptations petrified with reverence (the 1960 film of *Sons and Lovers*, for example). There seems to me a place for "variation" films: to be judged by standards analogous to variations in music and poetry. Has the adapter exploited the original material satisfactorily? Does he justify his alterations?

One obvious objection to this approach is that Brahms's variations are in the same medium and are not intended to produce the same effect as the original work; Brooks's variations, in a different medium, *are* so intended. But unless we are going to dismiss automatically as rape every film of every worthy novel, then we need some way of appreciating them as what they are: since they cannot, in the nature of the case, be the novels themselves. The work of the adapter, judged as possible contribution rather than being arbitrarily dismissed as vandalism, seems one viable approach. Let us shelve the literary purist view that the film's success must be judged by degree of fidelity, and instead judge whether the changes help the film, as film, to arrive at the same general effect; further, whether the changes show virtuosity in the new medium and thus actually add artistic values that were not possible in the first medium. (This, of course, in addition to those original elements that are retained and simply translated.)

By these standards, then, some of the changes in the script of *Lord Jim* are understandable: the untangling of the time-skein, for instance. But many are incomprehensible. Why, for instance, is the ship *Patna* in the midst of a storm when she strikes the obstacle? Surely it is less pictorially trite and dramatically much more conducive to Jim's later shame if, as in Conrad, the officers panic before the squall breaks. A large addition in the script is more understandable but less excusable: a character called The General has been invented, a dictator who tyrannizes the fictional country of Patusan and against whom Jim leads a revolution. I would guess that this whole episode is the producers' back-formation. They realized that the film would have to be shot partially on some Oriental location (Cambodia, as it turned out) as well as in studios; that to follow the synopsized Conrad story, as is, would give them a film of perhaps 100 or 110 minutes; that they needed a longer picture to justify the high prices they would have to charge even if it were shorter. Therefore they had to put in more story; and Brooks has supplied an extensive action-packed episode, with heavy implications about the People and Freedom. The General himself is one more try at the new-style philosophizing torturer, two of whose better incarnations are in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and Bridget Boland's *The Prisoner*. Eli Wallach plays him equally derivatively, with no suggestion of the necessary force.

Other changes—regrettable even by "variation" standards—are too many to detail, but two must be noted. By building the General (out of the character of Sherif Ali from *Lawrence of Arabia* [1962]?), Brooks has diminished Doramin, thus making Jim's last action less inevitable. Second, the pervasive tone of the script misses the important Conradian irony. It is all written as straight tragedy of honor—neo-Elizabethan style—without the ambience of the modern view that Conrad uses to keep his fiction from being stiffly absolutist. As a "variation" film,

then, *Lord Jim* shows expansion without inner justification; change of key to its detriment; italicizing of theme to disproportion. What John Osborne's script for *Tom Jones* (1963) is supposed by some (not by me) to have accomplished, will hardly be claimed for Brooks's script here. It is different but not equal.

But Brooks also directed, much more successfully than he adapted; and it is in this area that the cinematic values, as such, begin to appear. The montage section of Jim's marine training is swiftly and engagingly done, and the battles are clear, spacious, convincing. Some scenes that depart from Conrad—like Jim's last moments—are in themselves good film episodes. Of course Brooks had the help of one of the best film editors, Alan Osbiston. Otto Preminger wrote recently that critics overestimate the editor's contribution. Perhaps so. I note, however, that this is by far the best direction that Brooks has done and that J. Lee Thompson—whose taut *Guns of Navarone* (1961) was made with Osbiston's help—has not made a bearable film since he changed editors. As for cinematography, Brooks had the asset of Freddie Young, the superb cinematographer of David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*.

In the large cast Paul Lukas, as Stein, is outstanding. He has lost none of his magic power to move us. Daliah Lavi, as Jewel, is also outstanding because she is so bad. She is duskily lovely, but when she opens her mouth, she becomes a lump. And there is O'Toole as Jim. His work is the premier example in this picture of the benefits that a "variation" film can add. Obviously, the character is, as written here, a simplified version, without much of the original's humor or conscious self-dramatization. But the Conradian quintessence is there, a man torn in an agony that would not bother all men, although many might wish that they were capable of it. Peter O'Toole's person, voice, and performance heighten this romantic truth, making a somewhat different character from the original, but a fascinating and affecting one.

There are certainly resemblances between O'Toole's Jim and his T. E. Lawrence; but besides the fact that his King in *Becket* (1964) showed that he is not limited to this kind of part, there are subtle and lovely differences in Jim: the sheer sunny happiness of the early scenes, the hushed shock at discovering what he is capable of doing. (Much of the later portion is played in daring gradations of *piano*.) His last glance at the sky before he dies is that of the man who "goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct." All in all, this variation on the character of Conrad's Jim—simplified by Brooks but enriched by O'Toole—is as good a justification as this whole matter of adaptation is likely to get.

***Justine*, George Cukor, 1969 (*The New Republic*, 30 August 1969)**

Justine is a Pandro S. Berman production in Panavision, color, and trouble. Berman, who has been producing for over thirty years, has turned out several good entertainments, like some Astaire musicals; but he is subject to attacks of "quality" ambition, like (if they may be joined) *The Brothers Karamazov* (1958) and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1962). Others were involved first; still, he was probably predestined to try to make a film of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. Berman's first choice for director was Joseph Strick, possibly because Strick had just "licked" (in 1967) another long novel, *Ulysses*. But Strick-licking turned out to

be unsatisfactory and he was replaced by George Cukor. The Durrell work is much involved with femininity, explicit and atmospheric; Cukor, rightly or superficially, has the name of being a "woman's director." Together Berman and Cukor, with the scriptwriting of Lawrence B. Marcus, have licked Durrell, to a frazzle.

It couldn't have been otherwise. Durrell's tetralogy is, for me, a first-class second-class work of literature, gorgeous, witty, and flattering: it takes us into a universe of exoticism and sexual acceptances and ambiguities in a way that amuses us and moves us without really enlarging us, and it makes us feel terribly worldly just for having made the literary trip. Alone, those factors would have been assets for filming, but what makes the film transposition impossible is Durrell's chief defect. The longer the quartet goes on, the clearer it becomes, and the less interesting. What has been presented as character contradiction and exploration becomes just the deviousness of a well-fleshed spy story. Marcel Proust (so to speak) becomes Eric Ambler. Plus a big disadvantage for movies: Ambler can be filmed because from Word One he exists as Ambler, but to condense Durrell's four novels reduces them even from their own reductive process. They become, in film-script form, one long series of explanations. (With frantic attempts to touch as many bases as possible; there is even a fast reference to Cavafy, the poet of Alexandria who is so important to Durrell.)

Leon Shamroy, the cinematographer, began in films with Robert Flaherty and is a man of greater resource than he is usually allowed to show. The best elements in this film are visual: the exteriors (shot in Tunis) and some of the thick-draperied interiors, which made me feel as if my mouth were full of Turkish coffee. But even visually there are defects. Look at the scene in which Darley accompanies Justine to the beach and she frolics in the waves; then note, when we move to a close-up of them lying on the sand, how the light changes in the studio insert.

Anouk Aimée is Justine, which seems ideal casting. It would be if she had a part to play, but her role is a series of tenuously connected fragments. All she is able to do is to merchandise Aimée beauty and sexiness and sophisticated tenderness. She is not an actress of great depth or range, but she is certainly more than a personality. (Remember her portrayal of the wife in *8½* [1963].) Without the compass points of a character, an actress can only paddle around in the circle of herself, as producers and directors trade on what she has established in fuller roles in the past. This is what has already happened to Jeanne Moreau, whose appearances have become a kind of medley of "And then I played. . . ." I hope it will not happen to Aimée.

In that recurrent character of the young British schoolmaster in a strange environment, Michael York is merely British. Dirk Bogarde has an easy time of it with a dilution of the caustic Pursewarden. Anna Karina, the Melissa, does not gain in subtlety or credibility or physical appeal. Severn Dearden manages to get a little flavor into the capsule version of Balthasar. The rest are bland or worse.

This is Cukor's first film since he trudged through *My Fair Lady* (1964), and, at its best, it is competent. If Cukor had remained in the theater, where he started, he would presumably by now be considered a veteran competent director of "heart" comedies and lightweight dramas, capable of staging adequate productions of plays like *The Philadelphia Story* (of which he made the 1940 movie). Instead he went into films, where the equivalent quality of work has made

him, for some, a minor idol. Films are permanent, can be pored over, subjected to the aggrandizements of sentimental familiarity, and can be made to satisfy the hungers of those who feel an imperative to find serious merit in entertainment pictures.

Not all entertainment pictures, of course; that would spoil their constructs of discrimination. But in the Higher Philistinism, which, complexly articulated, is one aspect of the *auteur* theory in films, Cukor is hailed as having displayed superb style in his long string of fabricated commercial entertainments. One *auteur* critic has called Cukor a "genuine artist." I wonder, for instance, about both Cukor's genuineness and artistry in the sequence from *Justine* where Bogarde walks away from us past a huge bush in a garden. The incident is selected and photographed so that, with the memory of five thousand similar stereotyped moments behind us, we know he is going to be surprised by someone on the other side of the bush. Or the scene in which York climbs the dome of his schoolbuilding, an incident patently contrived so that he will surely be discovered up there by someone who is going to enter soon. The list could easily be lengthened, and does not persuade me about Cukor's "genuine artistry."

Ludwig, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972 (*The New Republic*, 23 August 1980)

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Our Hitler* (1977), though seven hours long, is only the third part of what Syberberg considers a trilogy. The first part is *Ludwig*, subtitled *Requiem for a Virgin King*, made in 1972 at a mere two hours and twenty minutes. *Ludwig* is now released in this country by the same firm that distributes the other film, American Zoetrope, and has had its American premiere in the film series at the Public Theater in New York.

Those who saw, or only read about, the Hitler film have some idea of the method in *Ludwig*. Seen second, it appears not so much a first part as a rough draft: in method and, to some degree, in handling of the themes. Ludwig II of Bavaria (1846-86), theatrically mad and madly theatrical though he was, doesn't remotely match Adolf in interest. His grandeurs and miseries, his loves and lonelinesses and lunacies, strike Syberberg—and some others—as signifiers of the "German soul," even as predictions of Nazism. Luchino Visconti had some such idea in *his* film *Ludwig* (1972), a relatively traditional narrative, gorgeous but garbled. In both versions, the historical resonance is muted for non-Germans, though, of the two, Syberberg treats it more openly.

His *Ludwig* is drenched with Wagner. The opening scene is a parody of the opening of *Das Rheingold*, with a child Ludwig as Alberich. Later there's a scene in which Ludwig—played by Harry Baer, who did much sitting at desks in *Our Hitler*—sits at a desk while we hear the entire "Liebestod" from *Tristan and Isolde*. There are also huge chunks of *Die Götterdämmerung*, *Lohengrin*, and more. In *Our Hitler* the proliferation of Wagner was complementary, but here Syberberg seems to be leaning on Wagner, asking the music to do much of his work for him.

A director of his gifts couldn't make a film without some excellent images. My favorite is a shot of Ludwig sitting in his palace, nude women on either side of him holding torches, snow falling in front of him; behind him is a rear-projection film of modern tourists being shown through that palace. Anachronisms are

frequent: further instances are soundtrack snippets of American radio shows—"Superman" and "The Shadow" and "The Lone Ranger." The only point I can see in them is facile: contrast between past *luxe* and mass-cult today. Or possibly, because these programs were presumably available on Armed Forces Radio in Germany, those snippets are reminders of the war and the defeat that Hitler (for Syberberg, a scion of Ludwig) brought on Germany.

One recurrent stylistic convention that differs from *Our Hitler* is the use of the patent sound-stages in the other film. Well, in *Our Hitler* Adolf is called the greatest filmmaker in the world, so the sound-stage device applies. In *Ludwig* the theater scenery crystallizes the theatricality of Ludwig's life and the "performance" of his life, his passion for the theater, his devotion to Wagner.

Through the rhapsody of free-form scenes—involving Bismarck, Wagner, Lola Montès, and many more—two themes pervade. First, the German self-image as romantic poisoning, which means poisoning both of and by romanticism. Second, Syberberg's torment at the fate of being German, of sharing that inheritance, along with his tormented pride at sharing it. But these themes are much more fulfilled in the later, longer film.

A final puzzler. The closing title is *Requiescat in Pace*. Why? I suppose we all wish a peaceful rest to most people, but after what has been shown here about antecedent curse, why a closing note of compassion?

The intervening film, No. 2 in the trilogy, is *Karl May* (1974), about the German writer of Western novels who is still very popular in the German-speaking world and was loved by Hitler. Despite reservations about the above, I hope No. 2 gets released in the U.S. At whatever level, Syberberg is too good to go unseen.

***We All Loved Each Other So Much*, Ettore Scola, 1974 (*The New Republic*, 18 June 1977)**

The worship of lost innocence is not an American monopoly. The Italian male loves to weep about his past purity, too, but in this case, at least, he's more entertaining about it. Ettore Scola, a director and screenwriter whose work has been coming to the U.S. sporadically for the last dozen or so years (as screenwriter, *High Infidelity* [1964] and *Il Sorpasso* [*The Easy Life*, 1962]), is the co-author and director of *We All Loved Each Other So Much*. It has some resemblance to last year's French film *Vincent, François, Paul, and the Others* (1974), so apparently male teariness about lost male innocence is international.

But there's some fun in it here. Three Italians were partisans together in the Second World War. The story virtually begins there, in black and white, after a brief present-tense introduction in color. The three go their ways, re-meeting from time to time by accident, the film of their lives progressing into color as it gets closer to the present. Nino Manfredi becomes a hospital orderly and remains one. Vittorio Gassman becomes a lawyer and marries the daughter of a rich building contractor. Stefano Satta Flores becomes a professor but is so inebriated with love for film that he gets into a fight, loses his job, has to leave his wife and child in the north, has to go to Rome and become a film critic. (*Eheu* ["Oh dear"], as older Romans used to say.) The three men are linked by their common past, of course, the high days when they were at their noblest, but they are also linked by a beautiful girl/woman, Stefania Sandrelli, whom Manfredi meets first, who gets

involved with the other two in time, but who ends up with Manfredi.

The point that is blazoned at the end— this postwar generation was a failure— is not remotely made in the film. This generation is no worse, no more or less responsible, than any other; the sighing moral is tacked on finally to give retroactive weight to a picture that is only a series of comic and sentimental episodes, some better than others. Scola uses clever devices. Early in the story Sandrelli, a would-be actress, takes Manfredi to a performance of O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, and the production's gimmick for internal revelation—a spotlight on the character who thinks aloud while the others "freeze" in the dark—is used frequently in the film thereafter for fair comic effect. Satta Flores' passion for films allows Scola to interweave a strand of contemporary Italian cinema history. De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) figures in the professor's own fate, and Scola goes on from this to use the shooting of the Fontana di Trevi scene in *La Dolce Vita* (1960) as a means of reuniting Manfredi and Sandrelli, who is an extra. (Fellini and Mastroianni appear briefly, revisiting their own pasts.) Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (*Eclipse*, 1962) touches the life of Gassman's rich wife.

It's a ragbag picture, thriving or not as it goes along by the appeal of each episode, and many of them *are* appealing. All the performances are good enough, though Manfredi will always be for me the actor they use when they can't get Ugo Tognazzi or Alberto Sordi; and though Aldo Fabrizi, the rich contractor, has become a bloated-toad grotesque of the man who played the priest in Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945). The picture is out to sell some stock-in-trade Italian charm and the facile rue of life seen against the glow of lost purity. It does.

Max Havelaar, Fons Rademakers, 1976 (*The New Republic*, 3 February 1979)

Question: What nineteenth-century Dutch novel was published in the United States in 1927 with an introduction by D. H. Lawrence? And also, reportedly, was described by Freud as one of the ten most outstanding works of world literature? Answer: I didn't know, either, until a film of the novel came along from Holland. *Max Havelaar*, published in Amsterdam in 1860, was written by Eduard Douwes Dekker under the pen name Multatuli, which, says Lawrence, is Latin for "suffered much." The book deals with Dutch rule in Indonesia and cruelty to Indonesians. It caused a furor and led, says Lawrence, to some betterment of conditions. But he emphasizes that the oppression was in fact carried out by native princes and existed long before the Dutch arrived to profit by it. That is one difference in the book from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with which it has be compared.

For decades *Max Havelaar* was the only Dutch novel of any world reputation, and in recent decades it lost even that distinction. In 1976 it was filmed by Fons Rademakers, who is himself, in a way, like the novel: he's the only Dutch filmmaker with any world reputation. (In fiction films. In documentaries there are Bert Haanstra and Joris Ivens.) Nonetheless, his work has hardly been seen in the U.S. He was born in 1920, studied acting at home and in Paris, still acts occasionally, but went into directing and was an assistant to Renoir, Fellini, De Sica, David Lean, and Jacques Becker. In Holland he made seven features before *Max Havelaar*, one of which (*The Village on the River*) was nominated for an Oscar in 1958 as Best Foreign Film.

Thus Rademakers is a mature director of long experience. You would know this, anyway, from the first few minutes of *Max Havelaar*. You would know that you are in the hands of an unostentatiously competent, impassioned director: a man who knows what he is doing and does it reticently, yet with an enthusiasm that keeps what you see very much more than merely well-turned. As with Renoir, his intimate moments are composed to make the most of them humanely, not prettily; as with Lean, his large-scale action has dash but also intelligence.

The film's prime achievement is that it runs two hours and forty-five minutes and is never boring. That negative compliment is, of course, made up of positives. The cinematography by Jan de Bont is exquisite: the colors show Indonesia as seductive as we want it to be without mushiness. The editing by Peter Bergema is alert (except for some shots that linger a moment after the action is finished—only a few frames make a difference). The film has dissatisfactions, but none of them has to do with the filming.

The story begins in Amsterdam in the 1850s, with Havelaar, impoverished, trying to interest a rich merchant in subsidizing publication of the manuscripts of his adventures. The merchant begins to read, and we flash back. Havelaar is a minor government official on Celebes who, after some success there, is assigned an assistant residency in a remote outpost on Java. He sails with his wife and small son. We have already seen that his predecessor on Java was poisoned by the native Regent for interference and that the murder was covered up with a false medical report; so we know what Havelaar is getting into. He gets into it. He tries to change the crooked system, not with blind heroics but with some understanding of custom. Still he fails; is assigned to a lesser post; resigns. Interwoven with this is the story of two very young Javanese lovers—played by two beautiful young people—whose lives end tragically in a rebellion.

Lawrence says that Dekker's novel is a satire. Not much satire in the film, except for the rather emphatic last sequence in which the camera pans slowly over Amsterdam burghers in church, singing a hymn of Christian love after we have just seen what their prosperity is built on. Other than that, the film is straightforward epic narrative. In fact, that's the film's chief drawback: its linear quality. Since I haven't read the book, I can't say whether Gerard Soeteman's screenplay is reductive, but the characters are painted a primary color at the beginning, and they never vary or deepen. Havelaar is high-minded and high-spirited: he dives into the shark-infested sea to save his boy's dog; he fights a duel to protect a native woman, then embraces the man whom he has wounded; he wins the hearts of all who are winnable; he never makes an error in judgment, only in expediency. His wife is unfailingly loyal. The young lovers are unfailingly idyllic. From the aspect of further dimensions in character or in any of the complex themes involved, the film does nothing. It moves through strophes that are made familiar very early.

But—not a negligible but—it moves through them very well. Rademakers directs with such vigor, such clarity, such compassion that, even though we soon realize more or less what we are going to see, we want to see it. Part of the appeal is sheer travelogue, but Rademakers integrates the exquisite Javanese landscapes—to show us why Havelaar loves this country and these people, why its ambiguities are going to defeat him. Rademakers' eye for motion is precise and comprehending, whether it's a carriage struggling along a dirt track with its escort or Havelaar embracing his wife. When the young lovers are pursued by killers through a forest, it's a real *chase* (a reminder of Kurosawa), not some trite footage

to be endured until that portion of the plot is fulfilled. Gentle details are handled gently: a boy with a flute; a tea party. If this film doesn't confirm Rademakers as a unique stylist, it gives us exceptionally enjoyable craft. (And a little late in Rademakers' day, too.)

A large part of his craft is his ability to cast and direct actors. His main choice brings us another belated discovery, Peter Faber, who plays Max. Faber fills—I mean *fills*—the role. He swings into it as surely as he does, often, onto horses. He looks a bit like Max von Sydow, and, though the character doesn't give him the chance for the depths that von Sydow has shown, Faber has presence and power, the ease and sense of address that come from experience. Whatever Rademakers' abilities, the picture would sag without Faber.

Are the Javanese players professionals? There's a Malaysian film industry, and I've read of filming in Indonesia as well. Professional or not, every one of them is good, adroitly responsive to Rademakers—particularly Minih bin Misan as the father of the boy.

Mention of von Sydow reminds me of Jan Troell's *The Emigrants* (1971) and *The New Land* (1972), based on novels by Vilhelm Moberg. *Max Havelaar* is the best (roughly) comparable film I've seen since: a film novel, with equal emphasis on both words. Troell's films are better, with more complex characters, a greater sense of growth, greater directorial sophistication. But, like them, *Max Havelaar* too makes a world and encloses us in it, making us feel released into new space at the same time that we are being enclosed. Anyway, if it did nothing more than, belatedly, introduce Rademakers and Faber, it would be very welcome.

Le Crabe tambour, Pierre Schoendoerffer, 1977 (*The New Republic*, 12 March 1984)

The title, *Le Crabe tambour*, is wretched even after it's explained. The protagonist's father called his children little crabs, and this son he called the drummer crab because the boy used to beat his chest at table when he was hungry. This is completely irrelevant to the film. It's not even misleading: it doesn't lead anywhere.

A pity because the film is generally strong and insistent, is always visually superb, and is ethically stubborn. The subject is military honor, the codes that men have evolved through history in war and in the sustenance of martial behavior. In the long view, we can see that these codes have about as much philosophic weight as epaulettes and medals; in shorter view, taking the world as it is, we can see that military codes do for some what organized religions do for many: they provide believers with a means of conducting their lives and deaths.

Le Crabe tambour was written by the French filmmaker Pierre Schoendoerffer from his novel of that name, which (we're told) was based on the life of a man who is still living. Schoendoerffer had long firsthand experience of the French war in Vietnam during the early 1950s and returned in 1967 to make a documentary called *The Anderson Platoon*, about the U.S. war there. Much of his new film takes place during that earlier, French war; parts of it go to Algeria and other places involving French arms and naval vessels.

The "present" of the film is aboard a destroyer heading west across the

Atlantic to tend some French trawlers off Newfoundland. A story about a man nicknamed the Drummer Crab is recounted idly on the bridge, and this starts a story about the same man that involves the destroyer's captain. The film keeps returning to this ship and a "present" narrative, but that narrative is filled out by a series of substantial flashbacks centering on the Drummer Crab, whose name was Willsdorff. He was a French naval officer (Alsatian evidently) whom we first see patrolling the Mekong River on a gunboat, easy, amused, gallant, a sort of reticent latter-day D'Artagnan figuratively conducting his own war in Vietnam; and he continued in Algeria, where he fought on behalf of the French colonials and opposed de Gaulle's settlement. He is shown to be the stuff of legends.

Willsdorff served a five-year prison term for his Algerian activities, after which—something like T. E. Lawrence in this regard—he opted for obscurity and is now captain of one of those trawlers off Canada. The destroyer's captain had once promised Willsdorff to resign his commission along with the other man in certain circumstances. The captain reneged and is making this voyage as a penance.

With its weavings through different planes of the past, the film provides a view of colonial disintegration through the eyes of men who had been trained to defend the empire and who had committed themselves. This is not today a widely popular belief; nonetheless these men felt betrayed by their country's government after putting their lives on the line, and keeping them there, to protect that country's interests. (I thought of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, an alpine comparison yet relevant because its protagonist holds views that don't elicit much sympathy from contemporary audiences.)

Le Crabe tambour has the force of understandable, if unshared, pride, and its impact would be even stronger if the two principal roles were more aptly cast. Jacques Perrin is merely credible as Willsdorff; he has no overtones, no conviction of belonging to a secret society of aristocrats, like Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). Jean Rochefort, usually an excellent actor, is miscast as the destroyer captain; it's an outline of a performance waiting for the appropriate colors. But the film never sags or wavers, and its harmonics of violent action and inner quandaries merit the term used in the publicity: Conradian.

Schoendoerffer has a keen sense of texture and pace, and he is also keen enough to make the most of Raoul Coutard, the cinematographer. Coutard has been busy since 1959, when he began his long association with Godard and Truffaut, among others. (I recently saw again Godard's *A Married Woman*, from 1964, which owes as much to Coutard as does this film.) In 1970 he made a documentary of his own about Vietnam, *Hoa-Binh*. His work in *Le Crabe tambour* confirms his place in the company of such men as Kazuo Miyagawa, Sven Nykvist, and Nestor Almendros. Coutard's Mekong River and African desert and Breton churchyards are breathtaking, but it is with the Atlantic itself that he triumphs. He makes the sea a monster, snarling and clawing at the destroyer or enticing it with deceptive steely calm. He transmutes the bow of the destroyer into the protagonist of an epic, slashing through waves higher than the ship, slicing ice floes into disappearing sculptures. He makes us remember how ships figure in the epics of the ancients. Yet the film never slacks into a gallery of pictures: always the angle and the light and the movement aid the moment. One shot in particular I expect not to forget—a daytime scene of thick fog, through which the destroyer materializes, its lights burning.

Le Crabe tambour was made in 1977 and, at this writing, is scheduled for only a one-week showing at the Public Theater in New York. This is ridiculous. All those who can respond to this film will, I trust, get the chance to see it.

The very limited engagement (at present) of *Le Crabe tambour* raises again a recurring question: Why review films that may not get widespread theatrical distribution? Some answers.

First, those who are specifically interested in films are interested in evaluations of what is happening in the art. This interest is not in direct ratio to availability—which is also true of course with other arts. Every national journal that reviews theater or musical performance knows that no more than a tiny percentage of its readers will see or hear the work discussed. Those journals assume an interest wider than the possibilities of attendance.

Second, with film, availability can be changed. Certain local theaters may be persuaded to book a film; and many films not widely distributed otherwise are eventually available for rental in 16mm. A sizable number of films are thus available that were *never* shown theatrically. (Not many foreign films make it as yet to cassettes.) Individuals, teachers and students, private and public film societies want to know about new films.

Third, and possibly most important, a point that has nothing to do with specific interest in the field: film is a subject. Apparently, people who like to read like to read about film. None of us is able to attend a tenth of all the concerts and exhibits and dance events that we read about; still we benefit from much of what we read about them. Those who do the writing rely on a hope that I reciprocally share.

***In a Year of Thirteen Moons*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1978 (*The New Republic*, 5 & 12 July 1980)**

Rainer Werner Fassbinder cascades on. He made his first feature film in 1965, and I've seen fourteen pictures that he's made since then, which means that I've missed twenty-one. By far the best of the fourteen were *Jail Bait* (1973) and *Effi Briest* (1974), both of which were adaptations—the first from a play by the contemporary Franz Xaver Kroetz, the second from Fontane's famous nineteenth-century novel. But no Law of Fassbinder can be inferred from this. A Fassbinder adaptation can be tedious (*Despair*, in 1978, from Nabokov); an original script of his can be engrossing (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, from 1974); he can direct beautifully a script by others that chews less than it bites off (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*, from 1979). A new Fassbinder film is, or can be, a new combination of experiences.

The only films he makes that are nearly predictable in quality are those on homosexuality. Fassbinder himself is openly homosexual and thus has more than a caseworker's interest in the subject, but the results so far have been weak: vapidly sentimental (*Fox and His Friends*, in 1975, with Fassbinder as a homosexual youth misused by rich men) or vacuously pretentious (*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, from 1972, in which a trite lesbian drama was suffocated in aesthetic velour).

His latest film to be released in the United States (not his most recent) keeps the weakness going. *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* is about a male homosexual after a transsexual operation who now lives as a woman: Erwin, who has an ex-

wife and a daughter, has become Elvira and lives with a man. The title refers to the fact that every seven years there's a year with thirteen moons, and we're told that such a year is dangerous for people primarily influenced by their emotions. But how many people aren't? Besides, there's no reason to think that Elvira was more stable in other years.

Maybe, after all, there *is* a Law of Fassbinder: when he treats homosexuality, his closeness to the subject damages him, instead of giving him special power. And this apparently applies also to transsexuality, which is surgical confirmation of an attraction to what was originally one's own sex. Once again, in *Thirteen Moons*, Fassbinder loses his humor, his slash against the explicit and drippy (how astringent *The Marriage of Maria Braun* was in this regard), his ability to carry his subject past data into metaphor.

Elvira's sufferings, in Frankfurt today, are burdened with both excess and insufficiency. First, as in the worst Tennessee Williams, what is called anguish of the soul is really just frustrated orgasm-hunting. I'm not knocking orgasms: quite the opposite. I'm deploring the residual puritanism that insists on poeticizing horniness. An orgasm is not much of a cure for true loneliness; both sex and the soul are debased by this Williams-Fassbinder lexicon. If there were even some hint that Fassbinder was consciously dealing with people who must aggrandize their needs with rhetoric, the film would be better. But there's no sense of this: Fassbinder's view seems to be Elvira's. A dingy sensual life is asked to serve as a moral arena—and fails.

In his weakened condition—weak in his discriminations—Fassbinder lowers his guard against the clichéd and the ridiculous. Is there a more facile film cliché than a sequence in a slaughterhouse to epitomize the disregarded horrors of everyday life? As for the ridiculous: a female prostitute friend, Zora, takes Elvira to a spiritual counselor; and there in a small room, while his boyfriend does muscle-building exercises, the counselor prattles loonily to Elvira, who is weeping copiously, as Zora examines her breasts in a mirror. (A cozy domestic interior that S. J. Perelman might have loved.) Or: Elvira, spending the night on the floor of a *luxe* office, listens and watches sympathetically as a black man comes in, discourses a while, then hangs himself. Or: Elvira herself commits suicide on a bed next to which Zora and a man are sprawled on the floor.

The intent of the story, which I won't synopsize, is presumably to extend and deepen our communions, but in spite of Volker Spengler's good performance as Elvira, it doesn't happen. Just the reverse: the underlying fault of *Thirteen Moons* is its narrowness, its parochialism. *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, for all its postmodernist high-handedness, moved to make its protagonist's life a symbol of West Germany. *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* stays where it starts, a gallery of eccentrics whose talk and behavior are narcissistic, deluded, essentially petty. Compare this film and Fassbinder's other homosexual films with the great postwar works of art on homosexuality, Genet's novels. Of *The Thief's Journal*, one of those novels, Sartre wrote:

> . . . behind the first-degree myths . . . we discover the reflective myths. . . . If you are able to see at the seam the thin line separating the enveloping myth from the enveloped myth, you will discover the truth, which is terrifying.

In *Thirteen Moons* nothing remotely like that happens. It never rises far above the lachrymose and faintly ridiculous; and it's very long.

But there's one important point to note. Fassbinder not only directed, which of course he always does; not only wrote the script, which he often does; not only did the art direction, which he sometimes does; he also did the cinematography, which to my knowledge he's never done before. It's fine. He's prodigious, all right. We won't have to wait long for further proof of it.

Theme, Gleb Panfilov, 1979 (*The New Republic*, 26 October 1987)

Glasnost touches the film world with the arrival of *Theme*, a Soviet film made in 1979 and shown in the USSR only in 1986. Now that we can see it here in the U.S., the immediate question is not why it was suppressed under the old Soviet dispensation but how it ever got made. The protagonist is a playwright, fifty-four years old, greatly successful in his younger years, idolized by many, especially the young, who is now in that time of middle middle-age when he feels sterile and ashamed. His past seems footling, his future empty. This of course is not a new subject, whether the protagonist is an artist, as in Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), or a man (or men) of business, as in numerous Italian and French films—Scola's *We All Loved Each Other So Much* (1974), for instance. But *Theme* puts the subject in an extraordinary context. This Soviet playwright has begun to think bitterly of his former subservience to state approval; and he comes into contact obliquely with a young writer, presumably Jewish, who means to emigrate for freedom of expression.

Near incredibly, this film was permitted to be made. After six years' hibernation, it was liberated, has arrived, is welcome. The screenplay, a collaboration between the director, Gleb Panfilov, and Alexander Chernivsky, tells of a visit to a small provincial town by the playwright, Kim Yesenin, with his friend and former war comrade, a novelist named Igor, and Kim's blond companion, Svetlana. (She very soon returns to Moscow, where they all live, when developments show her that she is in the way.)

They are to stay with an elderly woman friend of Igor's, but when they arrive at the house, Kim lets the others out and, restless, goes for a drive. He stumbles on a small museum that has an exhibit about a local poet. Inside he sees a lovely woman in her thirties guiding a group of French tourists. Kim, typically of the menopausal male, is sexually avid, especially because his name apparently has an aphrodisiac effect on women, and is interested.

He makes no move, but that night, the woman, Sasha, appears at their hostess's home for dinner. In the course of the evening, she delivers, with gentleness, some home truths to Kim about himself. He says he is glad to hear the truth, but we know the temper of that gladness. Next day, after a note from Sasha, he meets her in a graveyard, expecting that this is the prelude to an affair. It is not: she only wanted to show him the grave of the local poet and some epitaphs he had written. She leaves him suddenly. He learns her address, goes to her apartment, finds the door open, and is snooping around when she returns with a man. Those two halt in the doorway, while Kim skulks behind the refrigerator in the kitchen.

A long, hot, love-hate scene follows between the pair in the doorway, during which Kim is filled with curiosity and the fear of discovery. The man is

leaving the country—apparently for Israel—and implores Sasha to leave with him. She refuses; he tears himself away; she faints. Kim comes out of the kitchen, steps over her—a sourly funny moment—and escapes unseen. He gets into his car, intending to drive straight back to Moscow. He changes his mind; and a few other events conclude the film.

I've detailed the story because there's so little to it. But the simple structure is thoroughly enriched with character portrayal, with reflection. Throughout, we're given a double awareness: we see and hear what everyone in the scene sees and hears, and we also hear Kim's thoughts, on the soundtrack. Thus, while flattery and non-flattery are winged at him, we hear him in his invisible tower commenting on his isolation and wry despair. The six or seven major scenes are handled in theater-film style. That is, although Panfilov uses varied angles and reverse shots at different distances, the cinematics are minimal: the scenes are conceived like scenes in a play, meant to develop the drama by what is said. Because of the material, the actors, and Panfilov's delicacy, the film is never static. It grips.

Delicacy is not common in modern Soviet directing, but from the first sequence Panfilov shows it. His style is light but firm, refreshing in its spareness. In that sequence a car is traveling along a lonely road through a flat, snowy landscape. Inside are Kim and Igor and Svetlana. The two men squabble about the music on the radio. In a very long shot, we see the car stop; one man gets out and starts to walk away, the other man follows and persuades him to return to the car. All the while we hear their voices up close. The contrast between the immensity of the beautiful, stark landscape and the tiny, bickering figures is comic; but the shot also comments on the hugeness of Mother Russia, about which they have been talking in the car, and her almost cruel patience with her children,

Panfilov's chief stylistic predilections are long shots of that kind and scenes set in enclosed spaces, viewed through archways and doorways. The passionate love scene and quarrel between Sasha and her lover is seen for the most part as Kim would have seen it, spying from the kitchen—a narrow corridor of light in the dark apartment at the end of which two people are locked in one of the most important encounters of their lives. The composition seems to exert pressure on what is happening within it. And in the exterior shots, with Leonid Kalashnikov's camera, Panfilov conveys what is both awesome and lovely about the Russian winter.

The two leading actors are excellent. Sasha is played by Inna Churikova, who is Panfilov's wife and has made six films with him. She suggests a tulip—a long neck with a round head. Her face, not conventionally pretty, is open yet dignified. We're told that she is a big Soviet star, which is easy to believe. We're told the same about Mikhail Ulyanov, the Kim, and it's equally easy to believe. He looks like a craggier Richard Burton, and he has Burton's ability to speak with silence and with his voice—his voice itself, as distinct from the words he is uttering. A young traffic policeman, who is used politely as a comic foil, is well done by Sergei Nikonenko. Stanislav Lyubshin gives fire and pain to the emigré lover.

The ending of the film is a mirror of the protagonist's dilemma. It is the ending that Kim might have written for one of his plays, trying to tie up neatly the complications of some lives. Panfilov doesn't retract the playwright's discontents, but there is a small hint that light may be flickering at the end of the tunnel—a

theme that may salvage Kim's writing and his state of mind. But the very neatness of the ending implies an irony, and, in view of that irony, we may doubt that the light will flourish.

Still, *Theme* is an exceptional film, subtle and resonant. This is, I think, Panfilov's first film to be shown in the United States. Born in 1934, he was first trained as a chemical engineer, then went to the Moscow Film School. He has been making feature films since 1968—a total of seven, including three since *Theme*. More Panfilov, please.

Messidor, Alain Tanner, 1979 (*The New Republic*, 20 June 1981)

I hope that the following statement proves to be false. The career of Alain Tanner, the French-Swiss filmmaker, is following a familiar pattern: early promise, early achievement, then increasingly repetitive, assumptive, and self-indulgent work as it becomes increasingly clear that the director has said what he had to say and is not growing. This statement, which I would love to have the pleasure of retracting, is strengthened by Tanner's new film *Messidor*.

His first feature, *Charles, Dead or Alive* (1969), made when he was forty, was a version (conscious or not) of Tolstoy's *The Living Corpse*: a successful middle-aged businessman tries to reclaim his life by going to live among young dropouts and rebels. It was the work of a born filmmaker, but it was damp around the edges with sentimental leftism. His next, *La Salamandre* (1971), is one of the important films of the postwar era, I think. Two writers, of different intellectual tempers, try to do a television script about a working-class girl who committed a crime a year before. Emphases shift through the inquiry and, in a sense, she beats them, is too strong for them, emerging at the end free and angry and happy. It's one of the best films I know about changing consciousness in women and about bourgeois-liberal holidays in radicalism.

Tanner had a co-author on the script of *La Salamandre*, the English Marxist art critic and novelist John Berger, and I assumed that Berger's help explained the toughening of sinew and the stripping away of flab. This inference was heightened by Tanner's next—*Return from Africa* (1972)—which he did without Berger and which was just a protracted anecdote of bourgeois embarrassment about failure to break out of conventional patterns. But Berger returned for *The Middle of the World* (1974), which was stronger than *Return from Africa* yet much weaker than *La Salamandre*, a picture of promise that ended awash in big, unearned radical pronouncements. And Berger also worked with Tanner on the next, *Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000* (1976), which was drenched unbearably in the leftist sentimentality that had dampened the first and third pictures. *Jonah* was full of good-hearted radicals whose good-heartedness and radicalism were made to seem interchangeable and inseparable. A supermarket checkout girl was fired for thievery, a bad history teacher was fired because he was a bad teacher, etc., but our sympathies were supposed to be with them because they were contra society. The romance of radicalism had never been more glib, even in Godard.

Now Tanner has made another film without Berger, has said in fact that he made it without a formal script (if you choose to take interviews as gospel), that many scenes were improvised on a scenario. Improvised or not, this time he repeats himself in visual and structural formulations that exceed the idea of

personal style and merely reveal destitution (like Fellini in *City of Women* [1980]). Connected with that, worse than that, the film is nothing but sophomoric, radical, and philosophic assumptions.

Messidor takes its name from one of the summer months in the calendar of the French Revolution: it's also the name that the two girls in the film assume. Jeanne, nineteen years old, is a history student in Geneva, browned-off by studying for exams, who leaves her boyfriend to go hitchhiking in the country for a few days. Marie, eighteen, is a shopgirl who has been visiting her father in Geneva and is now returning to the town where she lives. The two girls meet when the same car gives them a lift. They like each other, each being an untypical experience for the other.

They push on together, hitchhiking and hiking past Marie's town, past the limits of the money they have, which means more or less what Jeanne has. They decide to play a kind of game with time and chance and motion, just to see how long they can go on. In the course of their adventures, they—brace yourself—meet *many kinds of people*! They meet generous ones and crabbed ones and lecherous ones, dismissive ones, complaining ones, uninterested and compassionate ones. Although they are already eighteen and nineteen, it's only now they discover that there are many sorts of people in the world.

They nearly get raped, though it's not quite clear why they couldn't have jumped out of the car when the two men turned up a dirt road. In order to get away, Marie has to bop one of the men with a rock. Why didn't the men expect attack? Why didn't each man grab one girl instead of both men grabbing Jeanne and leaving Marie free? Answer: because then the girls would not have been plunged into a legal-moral mess.

They are subsequently given food and shelter, by people who are therefore good; refused help, by people who are therefore bad. They steal a loaded pistol from an army officer who gives them a lift; hold up a grocer at gunpoint; are described on TV as armed fugitives; and, before their arrest, kill a man who, they think (incorrectly), informed on them.

During all of this we are expected to sympathize, if not approve—to understand that this heartless and materialist world of theirs and ours has numbed them into anomie and aimlessness, has driven them into exile and anarchy within their own country. All I could see was an exhibition of *angst* and alienation of the most facile, college-dorm sort. (I'd like to have heard the police chief explaining to the murdered man's widow: "You'll understand, ma'am. The girls were in an existential crisis.") Perfectly matched with the ideational banalities in the picture are the arty platitudes: sequences in which the two girls simply loaf and absolutely nothing happens; sequences in which we see only stretches of exquisite Swiss landscape—exquisitely photographed by Renato Berta, Tanner's customary cinematographer—ostensibly intended as ironic contrast between nature and man; a sequence in which the two girls squat and relieve themselves side by side; a sequence in which they play Russian roulette with the pistol. And the philosophic apex of it all? They come to realize that everyone passing in the street has goals and interests of his own.

The yoking of worker and intellectual, the use of withdrawal as statement, the categorization of all people as nice or not nice, these are Tanner elements that Tanner has by now reduced to cliché. But the very idea of the picture is by now a cliché: the picture that details the exile of a person within his own society, going

on a pilgrimage without a goal. It's a postwar crop, the best of which, Blier's *Going Places* (1974) was about two young men. (Can Tanner not know the Blier film?) Blier's men were sharply characterized: they were post-1968 nihilists whose lives mocked the very piety-mocking radicalism of 1968, just as Blier's direction mocked Godard's 1960s cinematic radicalism. Wenders' *Kings of the Road* (1976), and even the recent *Le Voyage en douce* (1980) and *Cocktail Molotov* (1980), fit more or less in this genre—call it the generation-gap, moral-political picaresque. But a special hazard of any picaresque is the string-of-beads structure; more than most forms, the picaresque has to justify its going on. *Messidor* could have been a half hour shorter and omitted nothing of consequence, could have been a half hour longer—perhaps would have been if the budget had permitted.

Another defect, particularly grievous in a meandering film, is the casting of the two girls. In *Going Places*, the two young men themselves, Gérard Depardieu and Patrick Dewaere, conveyed buried bitterness and rue, menace, sexual aura. Tanner's two young women, Clémentine Amouroux (Jeanne) and Catherine Rétoré (Marie), are as close to negligible as any two people can be who are followed by a camera for two hours. (No one whom a camera scrutinizes for two hours can be utterly uninteresting all the time, but that says more about photography than it necessarily says about the subject.)

Tanner—knowingly?—includes another connection to *Going Places*. When men are not available and blood is warm, Jeanne suggests a homosexual act to Marie, just as Depardieu does analogously to Dewaere in *Going Places*. Blier's men do it, Tanner's women do not—Marie, the working-class girl, is horrified. Blier's men were of more or less the same intellectual class. Maybe Tanner is implying something about working-class puritanism.

But then everything is straining to imply something in *Messidor*. Like many a serious but desperate director, Tanner seems to insist that every detail in his film is heavy with meaning. I began to feel that Tanner intended highway markers and food brands and types of cars to be "saying" things, like those ballets in which toys and furniture come to life at night. When news of the girls is broadcast on TV, it's supposed to show us how nasty the capitalist media are, I think. (As if any country wouldn't broadcast alarms about fugitives.) When the girls move into German-speaking Switzerland, I suppose it is to italicize their exile in their own country, and since Jeanne is the only one of the pair with a little German, I suppose it shows something about impediments to working-class education.

But no. These are all only sterile, thin strategies laid over a hollow idea. Shorn of pretense, *Messidor* is about two discontented girls who let their general unfocused unhappiness inflate its own importance and license their slide into crime. As a picture about the pitfalls of fake profundities, it might have been a black comedy, but it's certainly meant otherwise. *Angst* and anomie and the struggle to retain reason are much too grave questions in our time for this sort of smug, pass-the-wine-jug sighing.

Many a good artist has had, essentially, only one thing to say, but the living of his life has taught him differing ways to say it. Tanner has had only one thing to say so far but is in effect repeating the way he says it. His art is dying of starvation, and like many of the starving, it's getting bloated as it dies.

***City of Women*, Federico Fellini, 1980 (*The New Republic*, 4 April 1981)**

All through *City of Women* I kept wondering what had been going through Federico Fellini's mind while he was making it. That's an unorthodox way to view a film—Intentional Fallacy is only one of the canonical errors—but a few directors are so close to me that I feel personally involved in their new films. Some of their past works are so tightly knitted into my experience and fantasy that I can't escape a proprietary, even nervous feeling when a new film by one of them comes along. Bergman and Antonioni and Kurosawa are three such: Fellini, too, though his record is much less consistently high than the others. Still, the man who made *I Vitelloni* (1953), "The Temptations of Dr. Antonio" (in 1962, from the anthology film *Boccaccio '70*), *8½* (1963), and *Amarcord* (1974) belongs to me, and I can't help worrying about him, in intrusive, non-critical ways.

So with this latest film I couldn't help puzzling how he had made choices from day to day, hour to hour. *City of Women* is quite poor—at least as poor as *Orchestra Rehearsal* (1978) and without even the tiny asset of the last film's symbolism—an attempt at the harmony of music that ended in chaos. But it's not the inferiority of *City of Women* that distressed me most: what good artist has always worked well? (Look at later Picasso.) Besides, quality is not always best judged by the maker; many an artist has preferred works of his that the world ranks otherwise. No, what baffled me was, not why Fellini didn't see that the film wasn't very good but that he didn't recognize its familiarity, didn't know how much he was repeating himself.

Before some details on that point, a word on the structure. *City of Women* is schizoid. Part One is set in a huge *luxe* country hotel full of women—feminists, mostly young, variously caricatured—into which the tail-chasing Marcello Mastroianni stumbles. Well, not exactly stumbles: he gets off a train at Fregene (where Fellini has a house, by the way) to follow a Junoesque woman into the woods, and she leads him to the hotel. After a lot of humiliating tricks played by the women on the middle-aged, ludicrously lecherous Mastroianni, the film shifts gears. He wanders into the fantastically palatial home-and-harem of a middle-aged stud called, in the subtitles. Dr. Züberkock. (His name in Italian is Cazzone, which translates, without equivocation, as supercock.) After some more adventures in that house, whose atmosphere is the reverse of the hotel, Mastroianni moves into a mélange of personal memories.

The film ends where it began, in Mastroianni's railway compartment. The whole picture has been—I can hardly bear to write this—a dream. And Fellini tries for a last quasi-metaphysical twist by having three women of the dream come into the compartment after Mastroianni wakes.

The first part, the *luxe* hive full of nothing but queen bees, has an odd reverse-flow stylistic effect. It kept reminding me of Lina Wertmüller (also the stud's palace), and Wertmüller began her career as assistant to Fellini. More: the brutal, aggressive, castration-implying behavior of some of the women has suggestions of Bertrand Blier's *Femmes Fatales* (1976). Through these early sections could Fellini not have known all this? Could he have been unaware of echoes re-echoed?

Concede that possibility, and the last long section is still a very different matter. It's less a stroll down Mastroianni's Memory Lane, as presented, than down Fellini's. Some items: a beach, with a view of the sea; on the beach, some

boys peeping at the body of a woman; Mastroianni's use of expletives from comic-strip balloons; a sexual advance by a homely woman who exposes her gargantuan bosom at him; his cool wife visiting him in the midst of madness; fragments of vaudeville; a mass of people out of Mastroianni's past coming down a flight of steps at him; a shot looking directly down on him, floating high in the air; escape from women by ascent into the sky. You could list those items on an exam in Fellini, and ask the student to match them up with *8½*, *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), or *Amarcord*. How, I kept wondering, could Fellini not know he was duplicating and that, by duplicating, he was diminishing?

There's an additional burr. Analysis of Fellini films in Jungian or Freudian terms is plentiful, and a bit of it has even been helpful. Fellini seems to have read some of it and has taken it on himself to put in Jungian/Freudian clues instead of concentrating on the work and leaving the inferences to others. He uses a lot of long dark corridors with light at the end; he repeats often the device of Mastroianni on a winding children's playground slide; he opens and closes the film with his camera on the front of a locomotive heading for a tunnel. (Hitchcockians will spy a reference here.)

In some of Fellini's post-*Dolce Vita* fumbles, he has at least partially compensated with unique visual invention and spectacle, with staggering/witty costume and design and composition and color. Very little of that in *City of Women*. Dante Ferretti, the designer, is not as striking as Danilo Donati, who was not in the same class as the late great Piero Gherardi. And the music by Luis Bacalov is stratospheres below what the late Nino Rota used to supply for Fellini. I'll remember only a few bits from this film: the photograph gallery of women in Züberkock's home, with a switch under each picture that turns on the voice of the woman in sexual moments; or the pitch-black screen out of which the lights of a huge amusement park suddenly snap. Slim pickings for a 138-minute film.

I thought I had a rule of thumb about Fellini: that, after *La Dolce Vita* (1960), the good films were those about memory—*8½*, *Amarcord*, much of *The Clowns* (1970); but that thumb is now fractured along with its rule. *City of Women* is filled with reworkings and leftovers of memory, in a context of self-mockery that is itself histrionic and insincere, nothing like Guido's in *8½*. Is it really possible that, in all the months of preparation of this film, Fellini could not have known that he was rehashing?

***The Makioka Sisters*, Kon Ichikawa, 1983 (*The New Republic*, 4 March 1985)**

Kon Ichikawa is one of the lustrous names in Japanese cinema. Luster, in American context, means that a small fraction of a director's output has been seen in the U.S. and has been praised. For Ichikawa, that fraction—of a career that began in 1946 and numbers more than sixty films—includes *The Burmese Harp* (1956), *Fires on the Plain* (1959), *Odd Obsession* (1959), and *Tokyo Olympiad* (1965). The first two were powerful antiwar pictures, the third was about an aging husband's anguish over diminishing sexual power, the last was a documentary. These four films are not typical of Ichikawa's work, but then only his whole career could represent him typically. He is quoted as saying, "I don't have a unifying theme—I just make any picture I like or any that the company tells me to do." The remark may sound indifferent, but it's the indifference of a director whose

aesthetic consciousness, as Audie Bock writes in *Japanese Film Directors*, is assured "a permanent rank in contemporary film history."

Odd Obsession was made in 1958 from *The Key*, by Junichiro Tanizaki, considered one of Japan's premier twentieth-century novelists. In 1983 Ichikawa filmed *The Makioka Sisters* by Tanizaki, written before *The Key* and regarded even more highly. Tanizaki worked on it for a number of years during the 1940s, composing it as an elegy to a passing society; and the prospect of an Ichikawa film of the book was promising. The film now arrives, and disappoints.

Mine is not the disappointment of someone who knows the novel: I've read only an excerpt in a Donald Keene anthology. But from that excerpt, from Keene's comments, and from the screenplay by Ichikawa and Shinya Hidaka, it's not hard to infer the structure and tone of the whole, long work. The film begins in 1938 in Osaka; there reside four daughters of a deceased wealthy merchant. The four daughters range in age from about twenty to forty years old, and the older two are married. Through the ties of the four women, their conflicts and differences, their differing views of their place and their future as women, we get insights into a segment—apparently a large segment—of middle-class Japanese life.

The pattern is familiar. The execution is all. The work's value depends on the degree to which the familiar is made to reveal depths that surprise, illuminate, frighten. It seems safe to assume that, in the novel, Tanizaki did what Yasujiro Ozu did in several of his films: the diurnal became a crystal of the infinite. But in Ichikawa's film, the dailiness is all. Paths are faithfully traced, episodes are condensed to screen form and time, readers of the novel presumably are given sufficient recognition points so that they won't feel cheated.

Ichikawa has been called in Japan an "illustrator." Well, he wasn't merely an illustrator when he made *Fires on the Plain* from Shohei Ooka's novel or a mere reporter when he made *Tokyo Olympiad*; but for the most part, illustration and social reporting are what we get in *The Makioka Sisters*.

The actual making of the film, moment by moment, is predictably exceptional. The compositions, the editing, the rhythms are all done with surety and taste. The color, by a longtime collaborator, Kiyoshi Hasegawa, has a gentle unsubtlety, as if to suggest early color movies. One oddity, recurrent in Japanese film, is the use of Western music. I couldn't connect Handel's "Largo" with any of the several scenes it underscores.

The Shooting Party, Alan Bridges, 1985 (*The New Republic*, 17 June 1985)

Once again the screen converts an actor's face into a calendar of our lives, and once again this perception is intensified by seeing his latest film only after his death. In 1958, to cite a past instance, it was Robert Donat, in *The Inn of Sixth Happiness*, the ivory version of our younger idol. Donat had died before the picture was released, and his last words on the screen were "We shall not meet again, I think. Farewell." Now it's James Mason who appears posthumously, as the wealthy titled Englishman of 1913 who is the host of *The Shooting Party*. His last words in the film don't have the same sad aptness as Donat's, but since the film is itself an elegy, Mason's whole performance has a silver melancholy. I saw him first in *I Met a Murderer* (1939), saturnine and gripping, and, along with the rest of the

world, I've watched him go through many films and many years. Among artists there is an increment unique to actors, especially film actors: Mason's gently rueful old knight is deepened by our knowledge that it is old Mason.

Around him is a fitting company. Dorothy Tutin, a British theater treasure, plays his wife, lady of a vast manor. Edward Fox, the human knife blade, plays the most troublesome of the guests in their house, a nearly pathological lord. Cheryl Campbell, who was evangelism personified in *Chariots of Fire* (1981), here is Fox's hedonistic wife. The consciously fine young lovers (she's married, he isn't) are nicely turned by Judi Bowker and Rupert Frazer. An impressive man named Aharon Impale, new to me though a mature actor, plays the Jewish millionaire who is the uneasily welcomed member of the party. Gordon Jackson, best-known in the U.S. as the butler in the "Upstairs, Downstairs" television series (1971-75), is a wonderfully gnarled poacher who is pressed into service as a beater for the gentry's hunt; John Gielgud is passionately nutty as the crusader for animal rights who tries to stop the party's shooting of birds. (The confrontation between Gielgud and Mason, excellently written and played, is the first scene between them, I believe, since they were Cassius and Brutus in *Julius Caesar* in 1953.) Mason's other guests, including a snooty young Hungarian count, are also perfectly cast, as are two servant lovers who echo the above-stairs *amours*. Put such a group of actors in Tom Rand's Edwardian clothes (specially woven fabrics?) and the result is sumptuous nostalgia.

The pleasures go on. The music by John Scott is always helpful. Fred Tammes, the cinematographer, gives us earth and autumn outdoors without facile sepia; indoors he gives us period lighting without undue brilliance or shadow. The editor, Peter Davies, keeps the motion supple without distracting us. However, the editing probably owes a good deal—in general form—to Julian Bond's screenplay. I haven't read the Isabel Colegate novel on which it's based so I can't say how much of the dialogue is Bond's, but surely he's responsible for the structure, which deals handily with the group-protagonist problem. Bond keeps the numerous plot strands independent as they interweave.

Over all these elements presides the talent of the director, Alan Bridges. Clearly he is drawn to the earlier England of this century and to the interplay of classes. *The Hireling* (1973) was a small, true tragedy of class division. *The Return of the Soldier* (1982) dealt with cognate material. Here again Bridges is trying to understand the too easily understood, the tensions of class—between classes and within a class because class exists. His handling of place and protocol is fluent.

Bridges shows again that he inspires confidence in his actors. He evokes the quirkiest and the deepest that each can give his or her character. He uses his camera imaginatively for the small touch and the large. When Gielgud and Jackson meet, the poacher is in a field near us, just having killed a rabbit. The crusader, in a lane beyond and a little below him, doesn't see the killing. The poacher with his rabbit and the crusader with his pamphlets then move along companionably on different levels, the camera traveling with them, toward an inn. In larger scale Bridges ends the film with a near-repeat of his opening shot. At the start we see the hunting party in middle distance, moving slowly across a field from lower left toward upper right. One figure lingers behind, and we assume that it's Mason because we hear him commenting on the soundtrack. At the finish the party moves again in the same direction, this time bearing a litter with the body of a beater who has been accidentally killed. Again a figure lingers behind, and we assume it's

Frazer because his comments close the film.

But *The Shooting Party* has a major trouble. The title itself warns us of it, and the picture confirms it. The idea of a shooting party as symbol is so familiar that, far from stimulating, it puts us on guard. The prime film example, of course, is the hunt in Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939); Saura's *The Hunt* (1966) and the two films of Chekhov's novel *The Shooting Party* (1944, 1978) are further examples. The idea of a group of people put in a context of violence-as-pleasure in order to expose secrets in them, to epitomize differences in class, to foreshadow greater violence, is by now tired.

The Bridges-Bond film makes matters worse through emphasis. All aspects of the symbol are virtually labeled. In Mason's opening narration, he speaks of his country's worrisome condition, and he hazards that a possible war with Germany may ennoble it. At the dinner table Frazer speaks of the end of an era, of a civilization. Social change is ticked off with the presence of a Jew in these august Anglican precincts. (A reminder of Galsworthy's play *Loyalties*.) One of the beaters is accidentally shot—by Fox, crazily eager to improve his hunt score—and the dying man is cradled by Mason. Through the film, this man has talked bitterly of the upper classes, yet his last words, in an aristocrat's arms, are "God save the British empire," as if death were giving him a prevision of Sarajevo.

Even more emphasis comes from the Hungarian count, who is much more haughty than the titled English. He and Mason's granddaughter, previously attracted to each other, are speaking after the death. "After all," says the count, "he was only a peasant." She replies, "The thing is, you see, that we all knew him." All bets are then off between this pair. The exchange is patently meant to suggest the immutable cruelty of the continent as against the basic decency of Britain, thus in an oblique way to predict the First World War. (To me, the Hungarian's remark was less patronizing than her sentimentality.)

After the film itself, we see "facts" about the future deaths in battle of several of these fictional characters. Epilogues of this kind are now too commonplace to help, especially when they try for last quick stabs of poignancy, and especially when they state the obvious. Who would not assume that some of the men we have seen, regardless of class or country, would be killed in the war?

That's the difficulty with *The Shooting Party*—its overriding fear that it is not making its points. A large amount of talent in all the arts and crafts of film have been invested here, and in themselves they provide much pleasure. But it's as if two different minds were struggling with each other. The mind that dealt with the actual making of the film is subtle; the mind that dealt with the thematic material is frightened and heavy. The symbol of the shooting party—in 1913!—could not really be made fresh. But if the film had been content to imply, without blackboard-pointer comments, it might have been much more affecting.

***Year of the Dragon*, Michael Cimino, 1985 (*The New Republic*, 16 September 1985)**

Who will write the book about *Year of the Dragon*? Michael Cimino's previous film, *Heaven's Gate* (1980), is the subject of *Final Cut*, a recent book by Steven Bach, former production chief of United Artists, the company that was sunk by the immense flop of that film. *Year of the Dragon*, expensive though it surely

must have been, may not ruin its distributors, the company that bought United Artists; may not ruin its producer, Dino de Laurentiis; but it's such a sleazy story, with such ridiculous/offensive dialogue, with such a fusillade of febrile climaxes, that its career may prompt a literary sequel.

Much of *Final Cut* seemed to me *déjà vu*: I felt that, with other names and sums, I had read material like this many times before. One aspect was unique. Trouble was evident very early, and nothing was done about it. Says Bach:

> In the first six days of shooting on *Heaven's Gate*, Michael Cimino had fallen five days behind. He had shot almost 60,000 feet of film and had approximately a minute and a half of usable material, which had cost roughly $900,000 to expose. . . . No one as yet could estimate how much beyond [the budget of] $15 million the picture would go at the present rate.

Yet they kept going! The passage made me think of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. It's generally thought that the tower was built, then it leaned. But at least some people believe that it began to lean shortly after construction started and that the builders continued.

I don't know what the expense sheets looked like after six days' shooting on *Year of the Dragon* or how they compared with original budget estimates; but, even before that, hadn't anyone read the script? De Laurentiis and the executive producer, Fred Caruso, whatever their own powers, must at least have a friend or two who can read. That script, adapted by Cimino and Oliver Stone from a novel by Robert Daley, is like a two-hour special of "Miami Vice" or "Hill Street Blues," or any of that family, transferred to New York's Chinatown and environs, and padded to run another fifteen or twenty minutes. It's upholstered with some foreign travel, with some nudity and sex and a lot of rough language, but it's basically an ultrafamiliar television police yarn that was not fresh when television was invented. The bet, I assume, was that pubic hair and raunchy talk would take it out of the TV stratum into high cinema orbit; but they only emphasize the overall strain to make it seem more profound than TV.

A new captain is assigned to the Chinatown police precinct, and he says he's going to clean up the crime—drugs and drug murders, extortions, briberies, and slave labor—that infests the area. He goes up against the Chinese mafia (the clans are called triads), police department politics, and various other obstacles with all the assurance of a newcomer to police fiction, let alone police reality. Yet he has been a cop for fifteen years and is the most decorated man on the force.

His name is Stanley White. (A technical police consultant on the film is also named Stanley White. No claim is made that the film is biographical.) White's name is shortened from a Polish name, he says, so this apparently licenses him to call himself a Polack; and because he has a Chinese-American lover—a woman television newscaster—he can say Chink. (Cracks at Italians are licensed by the names of the director and producers.) Besides the racial slurring, which is relished as a screen liberation, there is an incessant barrage of obscenity. Nowadays it's supposedly retrograde to object to that language. Well, I object to it. Verisimilitude is not the question. (The other day I had lunch at a cafeteria table next to two policemen, and the talk was as blue as the tunics.) But the drenching of film dialogue with obscenity has become a nearly sure sign of desperation: the thinner the script, the more sulfurous the talk. And are there really many well-bred young

women who, in a lovers' quarrel, completely disregard being called a "cunt"?

On one hand, the film is crammed with cliché. On the other, it's crammed with incredible novelty. Cliché: the picture starts with a Chinese New Year's Day celebration, putting such emphasis on the firecrackers that we know the parade is going to be used as cover for a killing. White has marital troubles—he neglects his wife for his job—of so cinematically stale a kind that we wonder how the actors can find the steam to speak the lines. Analogously stale are the quarrels in the police commissioner's office. Sometimes the very words themselves are so trite that we almost gasp. During a lovers' quarrel: "Give you an inch and you take a mile."

Incredible novelty: The suave young boss of the Chinatown mafia makes a trip to Thailand and presents the chief of the heroin source with the head of a mafia rival. (I mean, Sam Peckinpah fans, the *head*.) A Chinese gun moll, fleeing the cops, runs into the middle of the street and is buffeted on one side, then the other, by passing cabs. Forget the fact that no street in Chinatown has two-way traffic: Wouldn't at least one of the drivers have stopped? The woman newscaster is angry at White when he comes to the studio; she doesn't want to speak to him. Why is she angry? Because she is involved with him, three Chinese men broke into her apartment the day before and raped her. Well, say, that would make any woman angry. The final shoot-out between White and the mafia boss—just a ton or two too heavily an update of a Western finish—ends with White's victory, after which he hands his gun to the supine boss, risking his own life, so that the Chinese can commit suicide. (A suggestion here of Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* [1961] gallantry. Can White have seen that film?)

Loose ends dangle in both plot and theme. Plot: an elderly Chinese forces his way into a Polish funeral, kneels at the coffin, and crosses himself. Who was he? A white man suddenly appears in the mafia boss's retinue to warn him that his office is bugged. Who was that white man? Theme: White blasts loudly at U.S. corruption by television; the subject is then dropped. Vietnam bitterness—whether pro- or anti- *Rambo* (1982) is not quite clear—is randomly raised and also dropped. (White is a Vietnam veteran.) The need to understand Chinese cultural complexities—White has an armful of books at the start—is raised, too, and dropped for the usual fists-and-firearms formula.

In short, which is the wrong term for a picture that runs over two hours, *Year of the Dragon* is a mess. The few fibers that hold it together are provided by some of the cast. Mickey Rourke plays White, and though he is not the new James Cagney that apparently some think him, he has splashes of street sex appeal and guts. Caroline Kava, familiar in the theater, gives a finely tuned performance in the trite role of his neglected wife. Another theater figure, gifted as actor and director, is the Chinese-American John Lone, coolly graceful as the mafia (triad) boss. Victor Wong, who has worked with Lone Off-Broadway (and who was the lovable saloon owner in *Dim Sum* [1985]), is effectively present as a member of the crime council. On the other hand, Ariane Koizumi, a slender young Chinese-American woman who plays the TV newscaster, is a slender young Chinese-American woman.

Cimino has a vivid sense of swirl and motion: he knows how to move a camera, and he knows how to move actors within the frame. He also has quite evident ability to win the confidence of actors, to open them up. He is so good at these matters that his besetting flaw comes as a continual shock: he has no sense of proportion. He doesn't know when dialogue gets ludicrous. (A rookie Chinese-

American cop interrupts objections to an assignment with a long, canned history of his people.) He doesn't know when logic is breached. (The hip TV newscaster sees a villainously smiling Chinese in her lobby, yet she goes straight on up to her apartment.) He doesn't know when quarrels, fights, or films themselves go on much too long. *Year of the Dragon* is flabby and invertebrate.

So was *Heaven's Gate*; and so, two years before it, was *The Deer Hunter* (1978). Risking the "I told you so" tag, I point out that Cimino's faults have been patent for some time; I wrote of *The Deer Hunter* at the time of its release: "So many of the elements are so good that it all adds up to a pity. Someone, or more than one—writer or producers or director or editor or all—fogged up about why this picture was being made and whether it was on the rails." The most interesting element in Cimino, more interesting than his gifts, is the mystery of how he mesmerizes people into financing his defects. *Final Cut* explored this mystery but didn't solve it. Maybe the next book will.

Wings of Desire, Wim Wenders, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 23 May 1988)

Those who admire Peter Handke's writing, as I do, will know that one of its prime components is the exaltation of minutiae. The protagonist (all of Handke's fiction is told from one point of view) will be walking along and will observe ordinary things; and by the very act of isolating commonplace details and linking them, Handke persuades us that the diurnal is mysterious, that to look closely at commonplace matters and to juxtapose them makes them even more mysterious.

Here's an example from his latest novel, *Across*, which is set in a suburb of Salzburg:

> On the darkening street of the Colony, a young girl in baggy blue trousers was walking straight into the last yellow glow in the sky. An older woman on a bicycle turned in from a side street, holding a full milk can in one hand. . . . An old man was walking from his house to his garden gate and back, changing his glasses on the way out and feeling his pulse on the way back. As usual, the wind was from the west.

Against this tessellated detail, made ominous simply by quiet scrutiny, an *agon* eventually grows that threatens to shake the cosmos in which girls walk and women bicycle and old men change their glasses. This is all the more true because that cosmos is lateral: the heavens above it are empty.

Handke alters this last point drastically in his new screenplay. (The stupid English title is *Wings of Desire*. The German title translates as *Heaven over Berlin* or possibly *The Sky over Berlin*.) Once again the fabric of the piece is made up of mundane details spliced together, but this time they are mostly the private thoughts of numberless individuals, not their visible actions or audible utterances, and those thoughts are heard by two angels who descend from a heaven that is obviously not empty.

Damiel, the chief of the two angels, is played by Bruno Ganz, perhaps best known as the Russian count in Rohmer's *Marquise of O . . .* (1976). His companion, Cassiel, is played by Otto Sander, who was the marquise's brother in that earlier film. Both angels wear ordinary clothes, undistinguished overcoats. Damiel's

wings are shown only occasionally—for instance, at the beginning when he stands atop the Gedächtniskirche looking down on Berlin. We never see him or Cassiel fly: they appear in one place or another and, occasionally, fade from the picture. They both move among people on the streets, in the Underground, in a library, listening to what is in the mind of one silent person after another. The angels cannot significantly help anyone, though their presence is sometimes sensed.

One other difference from previous Handke works is strong. Handke's characters generally move through their lives uncomplainingly and with considerable curiosity but not often with joy in the fact of existence. Damiel wants to exist—as a human. He is greatly moved by what he sees and hears, is particularly moved by children, and is jealous of mortal life. He wants to slough his angelic being and become someone within time, not outside it, someone content with the adventure of each mortal day. He says to Cassiel: "I want to enter history if only to hold an apple in my hand."

All this is seen against a backdrop of Berlin today at its ugliest, with some flashbacks of wartime newsreels. Three mortals stand out in Damiel's wanderings. There's an old storyteller fearful that his tales—and therefore the past—will be lost, played by the ancient Curt Bois, who was one of Brecht's favorite actors. Peter Falk appears as his rough-diamond self—an American actor named Peter Falk who is making a film about wartime Berlin, complete with swastika'd soldiers and yellow-badged Jews. Solveig Dommartin, a bit wan, is a trapeze performer with a small, failing circus, who is left alone, like Chaplin at the end of *The Circus* (1928), when her troupe moves on. Damiel falls in love with her, and that love galvanizes his change to mortal status.

The screenplay is too long. Handke's books and plays are all on the short side because he acutely measures stress on his peculiar structures and does not overload. Not so here. Twenty minutes cut out of the 130 would greatly improve the piece. The idea of angels moving among mortals never quite shakes a hint of sugariness, no matter how pungent the writing. Falk turns out to have been an angel himself who changed jobs thirty years before (to become a film actor!); he says, "There are a lot of us around," which is another touch of sweetening. But this new Handke, penetrating a world of secrets instead of observing surfaces that connote secrets, is making a wry comment on his former approach, heightened by his usual poetic insight. He is much helped by Ganz. No face ever looked less conventionally angelic yet more reticently compassionate.

The trouble with this screenplay—and obviously the worst thing to be said about it—is that it was filmed. It ought only to have been published. I would love to read it translated in full, not compressed into (quite good) subtitles. I would love to read it undistracted by Wim Wenders' filming. Wenders and Handke, old friends, have collaborated before. Wenders directed *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* (1972), the fine film that Handke adapted from his novel; and Wenders produced the film that Handke himself directed of his screenplay *The Left-Handed Woman* (1978), a gem. The best aspect of Wenders' work here is that it was done in Germany; he has returned home after his ungainly forays abroad and doesn't have to keep proving that he knows the terrain.

The next best aspect is the camerawork of the venerable Henri Alekan. (The circus in the film is named for him.) Most of the film is shot not in black and white, but in a sort of dark green and light gray, which strikes the right ambiguous note between realism and the unreal. But color sequences are arbitrarily inserted from

time to time by Wenders, with no apparent design. The color is merely a distraction. Worse is the distention of almost every sequence with repetitive shots and shots held too long. Equally bad is the film's lack of grace and rhythm. The result is that Wenders has done little more than underscore the weaknesses of Handke's screenplay—its risk of the saccharine and its undue length.

Its very existence as a film sets up expectations that wouldn't exist within a book—another reason I'd bet that there would be more pleasure in reading the screenplay. I can't remember ever thinking that previously about a film. In a way it's a comment on Handke's persistence as a daring artist, not always successful, and on Wenders' diminution as an artist, not often successful.

The Cry of the Owl, Claude Chabrol, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 11 November 1991)

Very often an opening shot tells us a lot about a director. The first thing we see in *The Cry of the Owl* is a darkened room. Then a young woman switches on the lights. That's all; yet by its crisp simplicity, we know that the director wanted to avoid a clichéd opening or a pretentious one. He wanted to use the ordinary in a way that evoked both our interest and our confidence in him.

That director was Claude Chabrol, who knows everything there is to know about filmmaking. He has made more than forty films since 1957, when in a sense he spawned the French New Wave. I haven't seen them all—not all have been released in the United States—but among the ones I know are such gems as *Landru* (1963) and *This Man Must Die* (1969). *The Cry of the Owl* was made in 1987 (he has made four films since then), was released spottily in the U.S., and is now launched again by the Film Forum in New York. A good thing, too.

The screenplay, adapted by Chabrol and Odile Barski from a Patricia Highsmith novel, tells the story of an unlucky man. Robert is a draftsman whose hobby is drawing predatory birds. (Among them is an owl.) A Parisian, he has moved to Vichy while getting a divorce and is trying to put himself in order. He is subject to depressions, but he has humor and warmth. He is haunted by the feeling that death accompanies him without touching him; and he has some reason to think so.

Gently, unmalevolently, he likes to spy through the windows of the house of Juliette, the woman we saw in the first shot. He doesn't know her and means no ill: he simply enjoys vicariously, from behind the trees, the life she lives with her boyfriend. She senses that someone is watching, and after some days, one afternoon when she is burning trash in the garden, Robert appears and explains himself.

Out of this odd encounter eventually come several murders and a suicide. Robert is completely innocent yet is more and more entangled. At the last, when still another killing occurs of which he is innocent, he reaches to involve himself. There's a final freeze frame (as we hear the owl's cry). Possibly he is about to put his fingerprints where they will incriminate him; this would keep him from causing more deaths, however innocently.

What is most intriguing about the story is that it seems not to have been plotted: we don't hear scriptwriters hammering and sawing. Certain characters are assembled, and from an initial premise, they simply follow their natures. Thus

the story unwinds its skeins and knits various fates.

Critics often compare Chabrol to Hitchcock (about whom he co-wrote a book with Éric Rohmer). At his best Chabrol seems to me to function as well as Hitchcock and with less hand-rubbing self-display. Except for an occasional Hitchcockian touch in *The Cry of the Owl*, like the trash fire leaping between Robert and Juliette when they first meet, Chabrol's directing mirrors the script's style: neat, shrewdly selective, limpid rather than patently scintillating. And yet before long we see that, tacitly, it does scintillate.

As Robert, Christophe Malavoy is completely engaging. His reserve, his empathy make his increasing entanglements much more moving than the conventional "wrong man" theme of Hitchcock because the story is less plotty, more humane. The woman who plays Juliette, Mathilda May, is one of the latest sensations of French films. This is easy to understand. She is quite competent and is strikingly attractive. The cinematographer—I could almost say "as usual" because he has done so many Chabrol films—was Jean Rabier. Excellent, as usual.

***The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Philip Kaufman, 1988 (*The New Republic*, 29 February 1988)**

Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, according to some, is a great novel. Maybe. Of greatness, tomorrow's critics are better judges than today's. But one point is sure: Kundera is the greatest café companion imaginable. To be seated across a small table from him with drinks or coffee cups between us, which is where his books seem to put me, certifies the sometimes dubious existence of civilization, even though his discourse wryly turns civilization over to show its underside.

What wit, what tacit grief, what quiet terror, what fresh insight into received ideas, what poignant interplay between eroticism and the political climate in which various lovers go to bed. And what nonchalance about traditional novelistic structure—a blitheness tolerable only in a writer with diamond-cutter's control. Reviewing an earlier Kundera novel, Robert M. Adams wrote:

> A constant interweaving of fantasy and realism, surreal metaphor and prosaic literalness, is characteristic of Kundera's technique. He intervenes frequently to address his readers directly, question his characters, recite his own experiences, or account for his authorial proceedings. He is particularly careful to leave undefined the relations between episodes of his novel; it is the reader's business to make of these relations what he can. Again and again in this artfully artless book an act or gesture turns imperceptibly into its exact opposite. . . . These subtle transformations and unemphasized points of correspondence are the special privileges of a meticulously crafted fiction.

Word for word these comments apply also to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. I would add only, in small dissent, that Kundera's intent to charm, and the knowing pathos of that charm because it comes from an exile writing about a country in bondage, is ultimately a bit theatrical.

Still, I've quoted Adams at length because he cites the important aspects of Kundera's work, and it is precisely those aspects that are missing from the new film of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Only a director with gifts analogous to Kundera's might have approximated the book's "artfully artless" qualities—say, a Godard or Makavejev at his best. Otherwise we were bound to get more or less what we got: plot elements extracted, connected, expanded, contracted. The depth and sparkle and shadow of Kundera's novel depend on the different glimpses of his story he gives us as he talks all around it. Without that context, the story itself is rather banal, disjointed, arbitrarily maneuvered; and without that context, the film has only a tenuous relation to the book.

Does knowledge of the book prejudice a prospective viewer of the film? Well, it made this prospective viewer hopeful. I hoped that Philip Kaufman, the director and co-author of the screenplay, would expand the capabilities he suggested in the past. (*The Right Stuff*, from 1983, and a remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, from 1978, are his two best previous films, both of them competently done.) I hoped that Jean-Claude Carrière, the co-author, who often worked with Buñuel, among others, would help to liberate the screenplay from convention. But the collaborators chose to make a film of a book that Kundera expressly did not write, a traditional, continuous, mostly present-tense novel.

Not only are the characters shorn of the Kundera context, they are shorn of characteristics so that they can slip more neatly into regular film slots. Of course the book had to be compressed—the picture runs almost three hours anyway—but Kaufman and Carrière have done their compressing less with an eye to condensing the original than to transforming it into a well-behaved film with good conventional narrative manners. Tomas, the central figure, is shorn of a previous marriage and of the son who grows to manhood and a life contrapuntal to his father's. The three other chief characters—Tereza, Tomas's wife; Sabina, his most recurrent mistress; and Franz, Sabina's principal other lover—are also shorn. Sabina comes off best for a negative reason: there's less of her background in the book to shear away.

Virtually none of the themes that Kundera weaves through his novel, that give the novel *its* character, is broached: compassion, cyclical repetition, Beethoven, the theological implications of shit—others, many others. As for the theme in the title, it's mentioned once. (I don't know what the title can mean to those who haven't read the book.) So is kitsch, which is one of Kundera's major motifs. The Oedipus theme is mentioned only to be mangled.

What we are left with is just a story, not particularly enthralling in itself. In the Prague of 1968 lives and works an attractive, philandering young brain surgeon named Tomas. The film opens in a hospital, where a nurse strips for him behind clouded glass while other doctors watch; even their patient sits up to look. This beginning made me expectant. Had they made the book into a comedy? This would emphasize only one of its tones; still, it might make a lively picture. Soon, however, the pace slowed to a plod, relieved—frequently—by passionate couplings.

Tomas's meeting with Tereza, his falling in love, their marriage, their flight to Geneva after the Soviet invasion, their return, the results of Tomas's one overt political action, the Sabina episodes with and without Tomas—all these are stitched into sequence, but the more we see, the thinner the film becomes. Even (or especially) when incidents are expanded from the novel, they are thinned. The

marriage, which is one sentence in the book, is spun out into a heavily comic "big" scene. The nude photographing of Sabina by Tereza and vice versa is much expanded and is given a homoerotic suggestion. (The book treats the scene as a teasing frolic between two members of Tomas's harem.) These scenes are typical of Kaufman and Carrière's predictable choices, which eat up screen time that might have been used to Kundera's advantage.

There are good touches. Early in the film Tomas goes to a hospital in a spa to perform brain surgery. Outside, a band is playing a waltz; Tomas hums along as he saws his patient's skull. The Soviet invasion of Prague is excellently done—Sven Nykvist is the cinematographer—blending newsreels with shots that include Tomas and Tereza. (Still, riots may not be so difficult: the best part of Spielberg's attenuated *Empire of the Sun* [1983] is the rioting in Shanghai.) And the screenplay honors one point in the book: Kundera's insistence that we know in advance about the fate of Tomas and Tereza. The film, like the book, ends with ironic happiness—their finish just ahead of them.

The film's best investment is in the cast, and Kaufman's best achievement is what he does with his actors. Juliette Binoche, the French actress who was in *Rouge Baiser* (*Red Kiss*, 1985), gives Tereza the right vulnerability and sweetness and desperate strength. The Sabina is Lena Olin, the Swedish actress who was the young woman in Bergman's *After the Rehearsal* (1984). How Olin has grown in spirit, guile, variety. She creates—to use an old-fashioned noun—a true bohemian. The Dutch actor Derek de Lint is appealing in what is left of Franz's character. (Because of the international cast, I'd better note that the film is in English.)

Daniel Day-Lewis, who was the cockney gay in *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and the Edwardian prig in *A Room With a View* (1985), comes on like a house afire as Tomas. (His hair darkened, he looks like a more supple Maximilian Schell.) But Day-Lewis's role is so sparely written, its dialogue so bald and trite, that the director seems to have relied on him to fill it out with acting. Day-Lewis tries his best. For instance, every time someone opens a door and finds him on the threshold, he goes through a little facial ballet to suggest complexities around the skimpy lines he is given to speak. It's clear that if the part had really been written, instead of being sketched at length, Day-Lewis could have carried it.

36 Fillette, Catherine Breillat, 1988 (*The New Republic*, 6 February 1989)

Catherine Breillat, the Frenchwoman who adapted *36 Fillette* from a novel of her own and directed the film, says that it's based on something that once happened to her. Since this is the story of a fourteen-year-old girl's sexual initiation, Breillat's comment titillates; but more important, it adds to the film's scariness.

The title is a French dress size, which must be ample because this fourteen-year-old, played by Delphine Zentout, is voluptuous. She and her older brother and her parents, a working-class family, are vacationing in a tent pitched near a crowded beach. The troubles *en famille* are standard adolescent vs. parents fare. One evening Zentout and her brother, breaking loose from home, are picked up by some people in a car. The driver is a man in his late thirties, Étienne Chicot. Zentout is attracted to him, frightened, sullenly aggressive; Chicot, a skilled womanizer, is only moderately interested. So it is not quite the *Lolita* syndrome. The man is not

particularly a pedophile; the nymphet is hotly curious, provocative, and, very privately, afraid.

In the course of the next few days, despite hassles with parents, Zentout pursues Chicot and becomes sexually intimate with him though she's not actually deflowered. The episode ends grubbily, unsatisfyingly. She looks up a teenaged boy whom she doesn't much like and maneuvers him into initiating her fully. Then she derides him and leaves. In the last shot, outside, she faces the camera and smiles, sunnily. That smile could mean a number of things. To me, it meant that she is now ready to fend for herself sexually and is now ready for vengeance.

36 Fillette is distinct from other films of recent years about teenaged girls and older men—*Beau-père* (*Stepfather*, 1981), *Peppermint Soda* (1977), *Smooth Talk* (1985)—for two reasons. The first is stylistic. Breillat—and this is rare nowadays—is a disciple of Godard. She shows this most clearly not with jump-cuts or by fracturing the boundaries of the frame, but through a Godardian naturalism that burrows beyond reproduction of life to distillation, the way an enlarged photograph of a commonplace object renders it into something else. For instance, there's a long scene in Chicot's hotel suite where screen time almost duplicates real time. Zentout asks for a drink, and Chicot goes into the next room to mix it. The camera remains with her as she waits, sitting, fidgeting, looking about, picking up something, putting it down, etc. The elapsed minute or so not only brings us closer to Zentout with a kind of engaging candor; the breach of cinematic convention is mimetic of the breach of social convention that Zentout is committing by being in this room.

To underscore the Godard connection, Breillat uses Jean-Pierre Léaud for a long conversation with Zentout early on—inserted, irrelevant to the action, merely an inquiry into character, such as Léaud did for Godard in *Masculine/Feminine* (1966).

The second distinction of *36 Fillette* is its frankness, which is treated quite casually, as if Zentout's actions were much more usual than society likes to hear about. On the one hand are the pretty patterns of behavior that older people impose on what they choose to forget of their own adolescence; on the other hand are the facts of sexual secrets, real or fantasized, that keep gnawing at the adolescent. (In Shepard's *Far North* [1988] a rabbity fifteen-year-old girl tells her aunt that she wishes she were dead, and the aunt says, "You'll only feel that way for another year, sweetheart.") All fourteen-year-old girls don't behave like Zentout, but not all parents want to know how many girls think about behaving that way. *36 Fillette* is discomfiting because it puts Zentout before us with nonchalant authenticity.

Is the older man reprehensible? Unreservedly, yes. But Zentout's actions make his response understandable. Breillat says that her early title for her novel and film was *Beware Wolves, or How Young Girls Ask for Their Own Murder*.

***Hanussen*, István Szabó, 1988 (*The New Republic*, 10 April 1989)**

Thomas Mann's story "Mario and the Magician" (1929), about the tragic result of a clairvoyant's performance in an Italian seaside resort, is sometimes read as an allegory of Italy under fascism. István Szabó's new film, *Hanussen*, is about an Austrian clairvoyant whose performances in Central Europe and in

Berlin coincide with the rise of Nazism and lead to a tragic end. The screenplay by Szabó and Peter Dobai is derived from facts about an actual Hanussen, and I don't know that either of these authors ever read the Mann story. If they haven't, the reminders of Mann in the film are all the more provocative, since on their own the filmmakers saw a connection between a thaumaturge and a quasi-sacral politics.

Szabó considers *Hanussen,* which is the protagonist's name, the last part of a trilogy. Film trilogies are often ex-post-facto affairs—the director decides later that that's what he was making—but certainly the first two films are also steeped in twentieth-century politics and war. *Mephisto* (again based on fact), from 1981, dealt with a German actor who was co-opted by the Nazis; *Colonel Redl* (*again* based on fact), from 1985, dealt with the treachery and homosexuality of an Austrian officer in the 1914 era. *Hanussen* has negative and positive resemblances to the previous two. Like them, it's more portentous than resolved. But like them, it's rich in detail and atmospherics that are more rewarding than its story.

Further links: *Hanussen* has the same cinematographer as the other two, Lajos Koltai, and the same leading actor, Klaus Maria Brandauer. Koltai's work is almost an analogue of the whole film, more lush than clarifying. Brandauer, however, gives his best performance in the "trilogy," more acutely inflected, more reticently strong, less frantic for effects. By the film's end he has drawn a man cunning yet unsure, vain of his occult power yet somewhat frightened, struggling yet resigned to his fate.

That resignation connects to Szabó's strength. Hanussen seems almost to accept his fate because he is a Central European, as if the people of his country, Austria, and of *Mitteleuropa* generally, are the pawns of harsh political powers. (Two of the lesser power figures in the film are based on historical personages: the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl and Walter Rathenau, the German minister of foreign affairs who was murdered by anti-Semite nationalists in 1922.) Szabó understands these Central Europeans and creates their world vividly: hotel lobbies, restaurants, cafés, Biedermeier apartments, clothes, of course—and faces. What a gallery of faces. Most of them are Hungarian actors—Erland Josephson, Swedish, is an exception—and all of them are presumably dubbed in the German on the soundtrack. Those faces are the film's real locus.

Hanussen begins with a battle during World War I, as some Austrian troops murmur the Lord's Prayer just before an attack. (The film's low point comes soon after: a banal shot of a crucified Jesus in a church amid the carnage.) A traumatized soldier named Schneider (Brandauer) comes under the care of a Jewish psychiatrist (Josephson); discovers his visionary powers; becomes, after the war, a professional with the name Hanussen; and tours. As the 1930s begin, he finds himself in the uncomfortable position of predicting Hitler's success, which leads to discomforts and dangers.

Hanussen has no specific plot parallels with Mann's great story; the relation is thematic—the linkage of performance to power and the operation of hypnosis in the political sphere. Though those themes are not completely realized, they resonate.

***Dead Poets Society*, Peter Weir, 1989 (*The New Republic*, 26 June 1989)**

The title *Dead Poets Society* comes from the name of a group of boarding-

school boys who meet secretly at night in a cave and read aloud from great writers. They have taken this idea from their English teacher, who was in such a group when he was a student at the school. (A salute to the filmmakers for using this eccentric, attractive title.)

The time is 1959. This explains, or justifies, the fact that there is neither a non-white face nor a non-Anglo-Saxon name in the film. This school is in Vermont. (The film was actually shot in Delaware—the first feature to be shot in Delaware, if that's of interest even in Delaware.) The school, which aches to be English, is 100 years old and prides itself, of course, on its antique traditions. A new teacher challenges some of those traditions, especially those of hidebound teaching, because of passion for his subject and concern for his students. He knows especially well what he is daring: he is an alumnus.

This teacher is witty, humane, unconventional. He irritates the rest of the faculty, but he sets out to win and stimulate the boys and does both. Those who know Jean Vigo's *Zéro de conduite* (1933) will recognize the configuration. If Vigo had wanted to beef up his film from its forty-four minutes into a feature, he might have used some of the plot strands in *Dead Poets Society*. One of the boys applies character lessons learned from his teacher in pursuit of a seemingly hopeless love. Another boy risks head-on conflict with his stern father about a choice of career. The teacher has opened an ambition in the boy, which the father means to block.

Nothing about this film sounds, as described, novel. Yet it grips, because it has been made with plentiful feeling, vigor, belief. Tom Schulman wrote the screenplay apparently out of a sense of indebtedness to a teacher of his own. We have all had at least one teacher like him—someone who fractures the die-cast role of teacher and seems a person with a life outside the classroom, who teaches as much out of that life as out of texts. The ending of the film, though a touch contrived, contrasts the two types of teacher, with victory going where we expect it to go.

Peter Weir, the Australian who made *Gallipoli* (1981), *The Last Wave* (1977), and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), among others, directed with a keen eye. Weir can be sententious, as in the films above, but American settings bring out the best in him. His most moving previous film was *Witness* (1985), set in the Amish country of Pennsylvania; now in Vermont (all right, Delaware) he again works in close, with heat and tenderness and no pomp. He's somewhat overfond of symbols—flocks of starlings or wild ducks, the members of the Society slowly disappearing in a mist—but he makes us as eager to see what will happen next as he seemingly is.

Weir is helped immensely by John Seale, the cinematographer who did *Witness* and, lately, *Rain Man* (1988). Seale shoots the seasons of the year like archetypal statements, and he gets the most out of corridors and cloisters in this neo-Gothic school.

But the film depends on the teacher, and Robin Williams plays him almost to the hilt. Williams has had trouble with straight roles (e.g., *The World According to Garp* [1982]) because he is much more a performer than an actor, specializing in stream of consciousness on fast-forward. There is no place for that specialty here. Still, the teacher he plays is a conscious performer, and Williams very nearly makes us forget that he is one, too. With his tight bright face like an expensive piece of polished leather goods, he bustles into every moment with appetite. (One negative aid: he has no love scenes to play in this film.)

Kurtwood Smith, whom I first became aware of as the DA in *True Believer* (1989), does the stern father with chilling force and surgical technique. Where has Smith been all these years? Norman Lloyd plays the crusty old head of the school with all the John Houseman authority he can muster. It's a difficult role because it's full of unavoidably predictable responses; Lloyd does his best to register a whole man. The boys, in their middle teens, are all adequate and are all empathetically handled by Weir.

Dead Poets Society, affecting though it is, benefits from context. American films of the past few months have been so dreary that a good new American film seems a special blessing. When the preview finished, many in the large audience applauded. I felt that, among other things, they were offering thanks for being spared this year another *Pink Cadillac* or *Criminal Law* or *Cold Feet* or *Vampire's Kiss*.

***Martha and I*, Jiří Weiss, 1990 (*The New Republic*, 13 March 1995)**

The Czech director Jiří Weiss was born in 1913 and won his first film prize, for a documentary, in 1934. Rapidly he became an outstanding figure in the pre-war Czech cinema. As Hitler loomed, Weiss, a Jew, moved to Britain where, for government units, he made his first fiction films. Then he joined the U.S. Signal Corps, and after the war he returned home. Again he became outstanding; yet again, this time because of growing Soviet pressures, he went into exile. He worked and taught in the United States. When the atmosphere changed, he returned to his own country, where once more he became a film stalwart.

In 1989, aged seventy-six, Weiss wrote *Martha and I*, derived from youthful memories, and in 1990 he directed it. Now, in 1995, after it has won prizes for Weiss and for his leading actors at several festivals, it is released in the United States (by Cinema Four). With this film, Weiss enters the circle of marathon winners, along with Buñuel, Lean, Huston, and others—directors who did notable work in their seventies. *Martha and I* is lovely. Sad but lovely.

The story deals with three people, which makes the title slightly ambiguous. The "I" is presumably Emil, the Czech boy whom we see growing up and whose voice, as a man, occasionally reminisces on the soundtrack. But Emil is absent for a stretch toward the end, and in any case the center consists of the relationships between Martha and both Emil and his uncle. So the "I" does double duty.

In 1935 Emil is in his early teens, the son of a well-to-do Jewish woman in Prague. One day she discovers him discovering *amour* with the maid, and she packs the boy off to her brother in the town of Brux. Uncle Ernst is a gynecologist, a free-thinking man who encourages Emil to read Boccaccio. When Ernst's much younger Hungarian wife is unfaithful to him, he divorces her, less in anger than in acceptance of the inevitable. Much more faithful to him is his cook and maid, Martha, a quiet, solid German woman, loving and gentle, who becomes maternally fond of Emil. It seems sensibly inevitable that Ernst marry Martha, which surprises neighbors but pleases Emil.

The warm, crinkly chronicle of life in the doctor's home, with friends and music and medical practice, gets its first crude jog when Martha's brother, *echt deutsch*, is invited to dinner and bursts out against one of the other guests, a Jew.

The brother has become a fervent Nazi—as did many in Czechoslovakia during the 1930s—and this allows us to prevision the rest of the film. Chillingly.

Eventually Ernst is forced to leave Brux. He moves to Prague with Martha and Emil. Eventually, too, Martha is abducted by her brothers—she has two—and is willy-nilly divorced from her Jewish husband. Emil, prompted by his uncle, flees the country. He isn't seen again until he returns after the war, in British uniform, to learn what happened to his family, including Martha.

Weiss, concerned with this humane exception of a Nazi's sister devoted to her Jewish husband, directs with comprehending reticence. He knows so much about his material that he is careful to say only what is necessary. Everything we see—a town street, a kitchen table—speaks of the place it is in and the long years behind it. Weiss made his film in locations where, he knows, matters much like his story actually occurred. An artist's biography is of course irrelevant to judgment of his work, but it's sometimes hard to forget. Why forget it in this case?

Quickly I add that, by any standards, Weiss's direction is fluent: dramatically sure, visually acute without artiness. He has cast his film perfectly and has drawn from his actors exactly the performances we want even though we didn't know it in advance. This is all the more remarkable because in most cases he had to do double casting, presences and voices. The dialogue is in German, as it needed to be for those people at that time, but most of the cast had to be dubbed. (Not something I generally applaud, but here it was apparently necessary. Most of the available actors speak Czech or Slovak.)

The one native German is Marianne Sägebrecht, who is Martha. Saegebrecht is the obese woman who was used, chiefly by Percy Adlon, in films that strove so feverishly for cult status that I could hardly wait for them to fall into cult hands. Here Weiss has treated Sägebrecht as an actress, and she has responded with sincerity, even finesse. It's easy to understand why, despite Martha's servile background and her size, the middle-aging doctor wanted to marry her.

He is played by Michel Piccoli. No, that is not a misprint: apparently some French financing depended on the use of Piccoli. All for the good. This silken diabolist turns to face us straight on, so to speak, and gives us a colorful, wise, engaging character. Václav Chalupa and Ondřej Vetchý, as the earlier and later Emil, fulfill their parts in the pattern.

More Weiss, please. Let's look forward to the next.

Korczak, Andrzej Wajda, 1990 (*The New Republic*, 8 April 1991)

Out of the Warsaw ghetto—I don't need to specify the years—have come stories of courage, devotion, bruised yet persistent pride that make the rest of us feel like pygmies. None of these stories is more humbling yet exalting than that of Janusz Korczak and his 200 children. Betty Jean Lifton gave the whole account of Korczak's life in *The King of Children* (1988). Now, from Poland—a country that manages to keep some embers of anti-Semitism glowing though it has only a few thousand Jews left out of the more than three million who were there before Hitler—comes a film that concentrates on Korczak's last three years. It was directed by the celebrated Andrzej Wajda and is called simply *Korczak*.

Korczak, born Henryk Goldszmit, was a Jewish physician, educated in

Poland and abroad, who specialized in children, and in more than the clinical sense. He was concerned as much with their social treatment as with their medical care. He formulated a so-called Magna Carta of children's rights, still so pertinent that, in his honor, UNESCO scheduled its Year of the Child, 1978-79, to coincide with the centennial anniversary of his birth.

He wrote novels for children (his pen name became his name for general use) and did popular radio programs in Warsaw that often dealt with children's issues. When the Germans came, he was the director of an orphanage for Jewish children. Through difficulties that don't need retelling here, Korczak and a few colleagues tried to take care of the children. Eventually the Germans took care of them. At Treblinka, amid the thousands of other rock monuments, stands one inscribed: "Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit) and the Children."

How I wish that Wajda's film were better. When I heard that it was forthcoming, my instinctive resistance to fiction about the Holocaust was stayed by the thought that Wajda, at his best, might treat the material in a way that justified its re-creation, with a view through art that enhanced the story instead of merely utilizing it. But *Korczak* is, at most, inoffensive.

The trouble begins with the screenplay by an old Wajda hand, Agnieska Holland. She had no perspective on the material, either in insight or in mode of telling. Her only object was to cram in as much incident and reference as possible in a hurried synoptic manner, not free of coincidences. So we move from an early pre-ghetto reference to Palestine as the land where Jews were free through a ghetto encounter with a German army doctor who just happens to have heard Korczak lecture in Berlin ten years earlier (these are only two of the ticked-off points) to a last sequence that is sheer cotton candy. The freight car in which Korczak and his children are being taken to Treblinka magically detaches itself from the rest of the train. In slow motion the doctor and the children descend from the car and, banner waving, march joyfully across a great field. This pneumatic uplift betrays even the mere literalness of the film.

Wajda has directed with no more imagination and style than if he were making a TV Movie of the Week on this Sunday's interesting topic. Except that he had the sense to use black and white and except for his choice of leading actor, Wajda doesn't even demonstrate the benefits of experience. Every scene is commonplace in treatment; and he has done some editing, especially with explanatory reaction shots, that is dismally heavy-handed. Nothing in the screenplay or directing raises this film, as film, above the banal.

The only vital element is the performance of Korczak. Wojciech Pszoniak, an important actor in the Polish theater, is probably best known in the U.S. for his Robespierre in one of Wajda's best films, *Danton* (1983). Here he plays Korczak with the fire of a man fueled by love and by impatience that the world can't act on what he takes to be patent truths. There's a manic quality in Korczak that is perhaps one aspect of heroism, an inability to deal with alternatives to whole-souled commitment. Pszoniak captures that quality so thoroughly that his acting almost seems to be struggling against the film in which it is caught.

Wajda was recently elected a senator in Poland and has said that this will be his last film. I hope not. I've never been a Wajda zealot, but I hope he can finish his film career with something more than good intentions.

Jungle Fever, Spike Lee, 1991 (*The New Republic*, 29 July 1991)

Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924) was not the first American play about interracial love; the line goes back at least to Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859). Since O'Neill, there have of course been more plays on the subject, and naturally some films. It's hardly surprising that the theme recurs in a country whose racial problems began early and remain severe. When at last a black filmmaker turns to the subject—the first one to do so, as far as I know—his choice seems historically inevitable, right, promising. More: Spike Lee's talent is by now a kind of cultural fact. But his *Jungle Fever* disappoints.

The central story concerns a black man and a white woman. A successful, married architect, played by Wesley Snipes, lives on Striver's Row in Harlem. A young Italian-American woman, Annabella Sciorra, who lives in the Bensonhurst district of Brooklyn, becomes his secretary. They work together late, into the night, and things happen—in the office, at first. Word of their affair reaches Snipes's wife and Sciorra's father. Tempests follow, evictions from their respective homes. The two lovers then try to live with each other; but their feelings falter and they soon separate, presumably to return in time to their previous lives.

This is the picture's prime letdown—not that the lovers part, but that the experience, for all the family storms it causes, seems adventitious, thematically thin. All we get from it is that she wanted the experience of loving a black man, and he, never before maritally unfaithful, couldn't resist a white woman. Here, after some centuries, a black artist—a black filmmaker—has a chance to explore this deep-running subject in our society, and he doesn't add any more to it than what anyone might have guessed, in fact not a great deal more than the arc of many extramarital affairs.

Worse, this love affair is used principally as an armature for other stories, some of which—as Lee treats them—are more interesting: Snipes's troubles with his crackhead older brother and with his parents; Sciorra's ructions with her father and brothers; her pursuit by a shy Bensonhurst swain, John Turturro, and his eventual shift of affection to a young black woman who comes into his candy store every morning for her newspaper. (She wants the *Times*. Throughout, *The New York Times* is used as a mark of black upward mobility.) These stories and others absorb us more than the central love affair.

Lee's screenplay has two other striking flaws. First, he doesn't deal comfortably with the middle-class elements. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., says that in the late '60s and '70s "many blacks became defensive about a middle-class past or future. . . . To be black and middle-class was to betray, somehow, one's black heritage." This may be the case, but it hardly licenses Lee to handle the details of the middle-class world so loosely. In Snipes's architectural firm, would the two (white) owner-partners argue loudly with him about business matters, in front of others, as they follow him down a corridor to his office? Would Snipes's wife, Lonette McKee, throw him out of the house the way she does? She is drawn as an ultra-chic woman, a buyer at Bloomingdale's, but she throws his clothes out their first-floor window and yells at him through that window like a fishwife, in front of the neighbors. Lee's own background is said to be middle class. But his writing seems more authentic when he goes further down the line.

Second, mechanical plotting. Snipes confides about his white lover to a black friend. Why? Sciorra confides about her black lover to white friends. Why?

In both cases, only because the author needs to have the beans spilled. Snipes's preacher-father and his mother invite him and Sciorra to dinner, and the father then excoriates Sciorra viciously. If we can foresee that this will happen, why not Snipes? When his druggy brother steals their father's television set, Snipes trails him to a crack den to get it back only to find that it has been sold for drugs, which any ten-year-old could have predicted. At the very end Snipes is accosted by a drug-crazed black hooker. In a spasm of compassion, he embraces her and lets out a cry of anguish. This is a glib, last-minute grab at profundity that doesn't grow out of what has happened before, as flashily clever as the hero's embrace of the starveling child at the end of the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Nicholas Nickleby*. (Did Lee see that show?)

But turn from Writer Lee to Director Lee, and we're in different country. Yes, he uses an irrelevant iris-out, and he uses again the sterile device of having people ride (inexplicably) past a background when they are supposed to be walking. But by and large Lee directs forcefully, keenly, with the assurance of someone born to do this work. The scenes in Turturro's candy store, when Sciorra's brothers and friends tease him and fight with him, seem played to street-corner percussion. The scenes with the druggy brother, Samuel L. Jackson, are pungently sad. (While he begs for money from his family, he performs the dance steps he used to do, as appeals to past family fun.)

And a new extraordinary quality appears in Lee's directing—gentleness. The Snipes-Sciorra affair, as it begins and grows, is given a tenderness hitherto unseen in Lee's work. (Except for the quite brief glimpse of Danny Aiello's feelings for Lee's sister in *Do the Right Thing* [1989].) Lee's treatment of Turturro is tender, too, and gives Turturro himself a break in his long line of snivelling sociopaths. In fact, Turturro's response to his black woman customer, of which we see only the start, hints at a more rewarding relationship than the scanted Snipes-Sciorra fling.

Snipes's acting has been highly praised; to me, he is moderately competent. Sciorra has had some stage experience, but her acting seems bred of films, small gestures, inflections, hesitations, impulses—a subtle oscillograph of buried feelings. Jackson, as the desperate brother, gives the film's strongest performance. When he enters, he commands, with innate power and with character conviction. Lee himself, as Snipes's blabbermouth friend, gives more or less the performance he has given several times before in his films, but with less asked of him, so he's more acceptable.

Ossie Davis is saddled with the preacher-father role. He's an imposing actor, but the role is tedious and is further burdened with a long monologue about sexual tensions between blacks and whites in the South that he came from, material that wasn't entirely new when Lillian Smith used it in *Strange Fruit* (1944). We learn a great deal more about current attitudes toward sex, black-white and black-black, from a seemingly improvised scene between McKee and some of her black girlfriends—a scene that, by indirection, underscores how Lee has deprived the Snipes-Sciorra affair of insights.

A last note, about the music. Lee uses three Sinatra recordings, old favorites, that soar under quarrels in the candy store and elsewhere. A wryly effective way for Lee to further his fixation with Italian-black relations. And a sort of proof that he is still more at ease, more subtle, in his old, by-now familiar territories than in this new one of middle-class interracial love. As a director, he grows, he excites. As a screenwriter, he still has more ambition than grasp.

Orlando, Sally Potter, 1992 (*The New Republic*, 28 June 1993)

Some projects in art are doomed from the start. For instance, the ballet of *Hamlet* that I once saw. It wasn't done by Balanchine for Baryshnikov, but even if those men had been involved, though it would have been blessedly improved, it still would have been doomed.

Sally Potter, a young Englishwoman of evident brains and talent, has written and directed a film of *Orlando*. The film itself makes clear that she understood most of the difficulties involved in adapting Virginia Woolf's book. But the film also makes clear that she didn't quite grasp the inevitable. Woolf's work is in the form that it's in because that's what it is.

One basic problem, as Potter did see, is not so much with the story—which presents problems enough—but with the prose: how to transmute it into film. For instance, after Orlando calls aloud her lover's name: "The beautiful, glittering name fell out of the sky like a steel blue feather." "Film that, Potter," she doubtlessly said to herself about that and about a hundred other instances in the book. She took steps. She engaged Alexei Rodionov, the very best of the Russian cinematographers whose work I've seen, and with him she contrived sequences that in themselves are gorgeous, evocative, austere, lush. Halations often crown scenes like aureoles.

The trouble is that all these sequences don't meld into the Woolf tissue, and without that tissue the book is only a fantastic tale. We can imagine that after Potter showed one or another sequence to people—possibly to backers—they said, "That's it. You've got it. Now for the whole thing." But the whole thing is precisely what isn't here. Probably couldn't be. Twenty-five years ago Mary Ellen Bute made a film modestly called *Passages* (1966) from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and, within scale, she succeeded better in her venture than Potter does here.

I don't mean to rank Woolf with Joyce. For this reader, *Orlando* is a lesser work than some claim. In the course of the book the disparaging poet Nicholas Greene says of Sir Thomas Browne that "he was for writing poetry in prose and people soon got tired of such conceits as that." It was brave of Woolf to include that line because it states her own book's risk-taking—the reader's feeling after a while that a slog through a barnyard might be a welcome respite from the empyrean. Still, there is the empyrean in the book, and we're constantly aware of Potter's gifted but unavailing attempts to reach it.

There's another trouble, too, inherent in the move to film. Woolf's fantasy follows her protagonist from the Elizabethan age to the present (which here is sensibly moved to our present from Woolf's 1928), with era stops along the way and with a gender change from male to female. For all these delicate impossibilities, Woolf enlists our collaboration simply by assuming that readers, taken by the manner of the telling, will work the necessary magic themselves. It's a cunning call to partnership with her, which flatters us and succeeds.

But film doesn't need that collaboration. Film is the very home of ascendancy over the literal, the earthbound. Changes of place and century and sex, in an instant, offer no problem whatsoever and need no kind of collaboration from the audience. Many decades of filmic miracles have left us, in a sense, imaginatively slothful because we needn't lift a figurative finger. Fantasy on film

demands less. It's "normal." On the screen, therefore, *Orlando* almost gets jostled into the *Time Bandits* (1981) genre.

Some lesser quibbles. Why is *Othello* misquoted? Why is Orlando's eventual son changed to a daughter? This upsets the gender cycle that Woolf presumably had in mind. Why insert such banal locutions as "Goodbye. Good luck"?

On the other hand, some of Potter's touches are fine. Queen Elizabeth's arrival at Orlando's stately home is a really royal progress. A tea party that the eighteenth-century Orlando attends, with Swift and Addison and Pope, is good pastiche fun. The gauzy-mysterious palace of a Middle Eastern potentate has pleasant *Arabian Nights* languor.

Some of the performances are striking. Quentin Crisp, in a nod to the story's androgyny, plays Elizabeth and is grandly sour as the old queen. It's she who bids Orlando, her young favorite, never to age. (However, she certainly doesn't bid him to become female. That comes later.) Heathcote Williams, himself a notable playwright, overenunciates amusingly as Greene, the Elizabethan literary malcontent, and in a witty casting maneuver, Greene also appears later as a modern money-minded publisher. John Wood, exquisite actor, is the Archduke Harry, looking like a Rowlandson cartoon. Charlotte Valandrey, as Sasha, Orlando's Russian light o' love, is enchanting. Billy Zane, as the female Orlando's nineteenth-century lover, here made an American, is a true romantic presence.

Tilda Swinton as Orlando is insufficient. She—here s/he might be permitted—fills the first need: she resembles Vita Sackville-West. Literary history's most open secret is that *Orlando* was an elegant love letter to Woolf's lesbian inamorata. (Three of the photographs in the book, supposedly of Orlando, are in fact of Sackville-West.) Swinton has subtlety—her line readings are sometimes almost chordal, freighted with more than one meaning. But she has no whiff of fire. This is a drastic loss in a character who, as male or female, goes lovemaking through the ages. Swinton's declarations of passion—for people, for poetry, for life—come right from the refrigerator.

Potter's directing often has freshness. At the very start she gives us a hint of it. The Elizabethan Orlando is striding back and forth under a great tree (the same tree under which the film ends), and Potter's camera, at a fair distance, moves counter to Orlando's striding, gliding left when he goes right and vice versa. She keeps him centered on the screen, but she avoids tracking him tritely. Potter's decision to have Orlando occasionally play to the camera is in fact the closest that the film comes to the invitations of the book. Moreover, the way that Potter takes Orlando through an immense maze in a formal garden, to emerge radically changed, has humor and verve.

But for all of this, for all the splendid costumes and the magnificence of such sequences as the festival on the frozen Thames, the film just keeps reaching and hoping.

The Age of Innocence, Martin Scorsese, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 18 October 1993)

The basic trouble with Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* is Edith Wharton's novel. Looking back fifty years in 1920, Wharton conceived a tale of love versus honor set in New York high society of that past era, and she embodied

it in a full-dress novel. But her material would have served only as a short story, at most a novella, for Tolstoy or Chekhov. What helps to sustain Wharton's more extended treatment is the attractive prose in which she wraps her narrative. Her writing has so much wit and perception, such a taking blend of satire-cum-nostalgia, that the book holds us though the story is slender. (I still feel the ending shortchanges us. I want to know what Ellen Olenska said to Newland Archer's son in her Paris apartment, what the youth thought when she ordered the shutters closed against his father, how he later reported the meeting to his father.) In the film, without its garment of text, the denuded story is thin.

It's worse than that—because the film tries to be the novel. Attempting to reproduce the text's quality, very nearly page for page, Scorsese even uses considerable prose excerpts on the soundtrack (read flatly by Joanne Woodward). He and his co-adapter, Jay Cocks, have been zealously faithful to the original, but, ironically, all that this fidelity does is make the picture seem slow. Film can't cloak, can't justify, as Wharton's prose does, the linearity of the story.

It's even worse—because (to close the novel's trap) Scorsese and Cocks had no choice: the picture has to run as long as it does. The adapters understood that there was absolutely no point in the enterprise if the decorum of drawing room and dining room, the rustle of silk and the spruceness of *boutonnières*, were slighted. Etiquette, at its most stately, is the theater of this drama. Among some critics, there was advance worry about this; could Scorsese, the director from Little Italy, cope with the Four Hundred? That worry always seemed unnecessary to me. A director of his gifts, flanked with brigades of various period experts, aided mightily by the camera of Michael Ballhaus, would delight in the nooks and crannies of the period—and he does. But it's a bitter triumph. He had to include all the glitter and elegance; yet it doesn't sustain the story as Wharton's writing does.

Not for lack of cinematic imagination. Scorsese is one of the two or three best American directors now at work, and his talent is quickly evident in the way the camera searches out every wisp of possible action in a scene, the way that characters move up to and past the camera to suggest that the theater in which we are sitting is part of the room on screen, the way the camera often nestles in to people as if to hear secrets. In a moment that might have been static for another director, when Newland Archer gets an important telegram from his fiancée, May Welland, Scorsese has May speak it in front of an immense bank of flowers as the camera comes close, charging the moment with perfume and intimacy.

When twenty-six years elapse, after Ellen takes herself out of Newland Archer's life and returns to Europe, a time-lapse that Wharton can handle with a simple chapter break, Scorsese shuns the banality of fade-out on the young Archer and fade-in on the middle-aged man. He concentrates on Archer's library, "in which most of the real things of his life had happened." He circles the room slowly, showing us moments in the Archer family chronicle during those years.

And music! The most Scorsesean touch in Wharton's book is that it begins at the opera. (Remember Mascagni under the opening of *Raging Bull* [1980].) Red meat to Scorsese, as it was to Visconti in *Senso* (1954). Onward from this opening, Scorsese uses lively music to spank sequences into life—often, at balls and parties, with music that comes from within the scene or else with Elmer Bernstein's felicitous score.

But—a heavy but—Scorsese has made serious mistakes with his principal

actors. The biggest disappointment is in the crucial part, Daniel Day-Lewis as Newland Archer. Archer is the protagonist, happily affianced to May Welland, who then falls in love with the newly arrived Ellen Olenska. The central drama is his. (Ellen's *agon* is no less, but she isn't placed at the center.) On the basis of Day-Lewis's past work, forceful and graphic in *A Room With a View* (1985), *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), and *My Left Foot* (1989), he seemed very likely to inhabit the role, to vitalize it. He doesn't. He merely moves through it. There's never a spark to sting us: he leaves us cold, observant. Perhaps Scorsese was counting on his personality to grip us, a resident power such as Fredric March or James Mason had. Day-Lewis doesn't have it. He needed to act (which Mason or March would have done, too!), but he doesn't. He skates through. It's surprising that Scorsese didn't remedy this.

Michelle Pfeiffer is a somewhat more complicated case. As Ellen Olenska, the American who returns to New York after a broken European marriage, Pfeiffer tries hard but fails. It's sad. She is living as intelligent a life as is possible for an American film star these days: seeking variety, taking chances, addressing every role with all the resources she can command. She just doesn't command enough—in fire or depth or resonance. The result in film after film is a somewhat washed-out version of the woman she is playing, like a painting that has faded. Her Ellen is perceptible but pallid. What helps Pfeiffer most is the fact that though she is exceptionally pretty, she patently doesn't rely on her prettiness: she wants to act. But, with her Ellen, though we know what she means from moment to moment, we simply don't feel it.

Winona Ryder is disastrously miscast as May Welland, Archer's utterly conventional fiancée and eventual wife, who turns out to have been more perceptive than her husband knew. Ryder is wrong, first, physically. Wharton describes May as being "tall, round-bosomed, and willowy" with a "goddesslike-build," and comments frequently on her features. Clearly Wharton means May's physical being to help explain why Archer wanted her. Here Archer has chosen a moderately pleasant, quite unremarkable girl. As for Ryder's acting, the one smile for me in this film—which is and must be socially hyperconscious—occurred when Ryder remarks to Archer that a man she has just met seems common. To put it gently, her social superiority is unconvincing.

Robert Sean Leonard, who trivialized Claudio in the recent *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), has less chance here to do damage in the small role of Archer's son. But most of the supporting actors in the lustrous New York social parade are neatly cast, and two of them do the best acting in the film. Alec McCowen, as Sillerton Jackson, the aging socialite, has the gravity of a man to whom protocol is his reason for being. Miriam Margolyes, as the obese and ultra-rich Mrs. Mingott, curls the surrounding air with dry disdain and hierarchical rigor.

The Age of Innocence was dramatized on Broadway in 1928 and was filmed in Hollywood in 1924 and 1934. I don't know any of those versions, and I wonder how (which means I doubt that) they avoided the snare that Wharton unwittingly set for her adapters, the snare that, for all his gifts, caught Scorsese.

***The Remains of the Day*, James Ivory, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 6 December 1993)**

Anthony Hopkins is the center of *The Remains of the Day*—more specifically, Hopkins' body. After an introductory sequence that takes us up a driveway to palatial Darlington Hall in Oxfordshire, where an auction is being conducted in a tent on the lawn, the picture proper begins with Hopkins, as Stevens the butler, opening some shutters. His tempo of movement, the pitch of his body, the set of his head, the fact that—apparently just by thinking it—he has enlarged his jaw to suggest a touch of the bulldog, these things announce that a character has been created and that we are in for exceptional acting.

Nowadays we hear a good deal about body language, particularly in connection with so-called performance artists. Good for them. But, for actors, body language has been around for a while: Jack Nicholson in *Hoffa* (1992) and Vanessa Redgrave in *Howards End* (1992) are only two recent examples. Quite clearly, Hopkins decided that the man who led Stevens' life would manifest it physically, kinetically. He bears himself like the legatee of a line of butlers with the charge of passing on the legacy.

From this conception, the rest follows inevitably, if you're Hopkins. The precision of his speech conveys that he is a man who has learned to speak well without any substantial education behind him. (His father, whom we meet in the course of things, has a working-class accent.) The time is 1958, the "present" of the film; and Hopkins gives us a man who has aged somewhat but is still perfectly competent, grown from the Stevens before World War II, whom we soon see. We quickly feel that the Hall would seem empty without him. In short, Hopkins is the film. Excellent though it is in many ways, it would come to little without his performance.

The screenplay readjusts some of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, not to its advantage. As is widely known, a screenplay by Harold Pinter was discarded in favor of one by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, the usual writer of this director, James Ivory, and his producer, Ismail Merchant. It's conceivable that Pinter wanted to stick closer to the book; his previous adaptations suggest this. Jhabvala is certainly no crude hack, but she has underscored some matters and has altered the tone of the original.

The story interweaves the "present" with doings in Darlington Hall in the 1930s. From Stevens, moving through both time planes, we get a personification of Britain slipping fatefully into World War II and struggling for balance thereafter. Stevens is devoted to his master, Lord Darlington, a well-meaning but fuzzy-minded aristo who, in the 1930s, thinks he is working to avoid war and who invites high figures in various governments to convene in his house. (The suggestions of the notorious Cliveden Set are clear.) Stevens feels honored to be serving a man who is involved in great events and who intends well for his country. Stevens' blind trust is meant as nationally symbolic.

Also running through the pre-war and postwar years are his relations with the housekeeper, Miss Kenton, whom we first see in her early thirties. They have occasional disagreements, yet he respects her professionalism. On his part, it's no more than that. He never acknowledges that her response may be otherwise.

Both the political element and the personal element are subtly drawn in the book, but Jhabvala italicizes much of the subtlety. On the political side there is an encounter with a doctor in the postwar years that pounds a point to pieces. Stevens has taken a holiday, as urged by his new American employer (Darlington has died), and has borrowed a car. He goes to visit Miss Kenton, long departed

from the Hall, who now lives in the West Country. En route he meets a doctor who—in the film, not the book—harries Stevens about his tacit collaboration in the allegedly treacherous activities at Darlington Hall before the war until Stevens evades and lies a bit. This changes Stevens front a man armored in loyalty to a shifty time-server, and it's done just to make sure the audience understands that the film's political heart is in the right place.

Stevens' relationship with Miss Kenton is as it was in the book, but the film's treatment of it is more sentimental. When they are in service together, she has a rather reticent crush on him, but the film underscores it. In the "present," as he drives to meet her in his employer's car (a Daimler, not the novel's Ford), as we learn that she has been married, has a daughter, and is now separated from her husband, we suspect that at romance may be belatedly fulfilled. No such thing happens. When he and Miss Kenton part after a mild afternoon together, he puts her on a bus, then notices that she is crying. That's all—in the novel. The film holds on her face as she rides away in tears, her last chance with him fading away.

This shot ruptures the first-person perspective of Stevens (not for the first time, either) that is essential to the work. That perspective is not merely a literary device that could be discarded in the film. Ishiguro's aim was to show a man so encapsulated in protocols that all the major events of his life, political and emotional, happen on the periphery of that life. We see, through his eyes, more clearly than he does what is happening around him. Ishiguro means this, I believe, as a comment on England. The film fractures his intent. The argument presumably is that the fracturing needed to be done in order to make the novel into a film. This argument can be doubted; in any case, what is not arguable is that, to Ishiguro's exquisitely poised work, Jhabvala has painted on colors of "Upstairs, Downstairs" (1971-75).

Let's add very quickly that, whatever the screenplay's flaws, it is filmed superbly. James Ivory showed in *Howards End* that he is no longer (the British jibe) a Laura Ashley director, chiefly interested in décor. Ivory does equally well in *The Remains of the Day*. Darlington Hail—actually several stately homes were used—is treated as Stevens might have treated it: majestic, venerable, but the place where he works.

Emma Thompson, on whom be peace, is Miss Kenton, gently exact in her blend of professional pride and personal desperation. She is lesser in the story than Hopkins, but she certainly helps to keep the fabric whole. Her best scene is one in a pub with the man she determines to marry. But I must note that this scene, too, is an insertion in the original, as are others of her scenes. Again the argument, I suppose, is for heightened dramatization; again, it is done at the expense of the poignantly enclosed feeling of the novel.

James Fox plays Darlington with the right tweedy ease, warm but dim. Christopher Reeves plays a "collapsed" part; the American congressman who attends a Darlington Hall conference before the war is here combined with the postwar American who buys the Hall. Poor Reeves. He's so big and so conventionally handsome that, though he is serious, it's hard to take him seriously.

Elegy is the key term for this work, from the title onward. In the film version, the explicit touches don't help; but because of Ivory and Hopkins and their colleagues, much of it has melancholy beauty.

The Natural, Barry Levinson, 1994 (*The New Republic*, 11 June 1984)

In *The Natural*, Robert Redford is first seen as a Midwest farm youth in the late 1920s who goes to Chicago for a pitching tryout with the Cubs and seems bound to make good. A woman whom he met on the train invites him to her hotel room; she, demented, shoots him in the stomach, then commits suicide. After fifteen obscure years, most of them spent out of baseball, Redford is scouted by the New York Knights in a semi-pro game, comes to New York, and in time succeeds as a slugging outfielder. Again a beautiful woman threatens him with destruction—of a different sort. The sudden reappearance of a sweetheart from his farm-country past, accompanied by the adolescent son that Redford didn't know he had, bolsters him, brings him through to victory and to the retirement that his health demands. He returns to the farmland of his boyhood; the last sequence is a replay of the opening sequence in a wheat field, except that he is throwing fly balls as his father once did and his son is catching them instead of himself.

As screen stories go, it's pretty good: with its Hemingway use of contemporary sport as the locus of contemporary epic, with agreeable symmetries, and with a symbolic overlay of temptations and redemption. As screen adaptations go, it really *goes*—far from the Bernard Malamud novel that is its source. Robert Towne and Phil Dusenberry, the screenwriters, have reworked much of the material of the novel, some of it quite unconventional, into a script that tries to retain the unconventional atmosphere while forging conventional form. To Malamud's symmetries they have added some of their own (the use of lightning, for instance); they have converted Malamud's malevolent forces into patent villains; and they have transformed his novel of haunting fate into a mystical story with a happy ending. *The Natural* was Malamud's first novel (and has no Jews in it), but it contains several themes that run through his later books (all of which have Jews in them): actions have consequences; some mistakes are irreparable; happiness exists as a criterion, not as an achievable state; life, seen with ideal objectivity, is a complex joke but still a joke, even though, like the hero of *The Natural*, you weep "many bitter tears" at the end of your story. The screenwriters have kept only hints of these themes.

I'm not raising here the antique complaint of the distortion of a novel (or play) by film, although there's no question that Malamud's novel *has* been distorted. Even if one places this book among its author's lesser works—my own opinion—one can't be blind either to the screen changes or the reasons for them. If *The Natural* is sacrosanct to you, stay away from the film and reread the book. On the other hand, if you want to see how some competent craftsmen winnowed some cinematic elements out of the book and transmuted them to their own ends, the film has its rewards.

The first problem that the filmmakers faced, and dealt with adequately, was tone: how to balance and combine the hard, clear-cut talk and action of baseball with the numinous elements that overhang the story. (Curious, how baseball induces authors to use it as a locus for the fantastic. Some post-Malamud examples: Douglas Wallop's novel *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant*, which became the musical and film musical *Damn Yankees* [1958]; Robert Coover's novel *The Universal Baseball Association, Henry Waugh, Prop.*; John Ford Noonan's play *The Year Boston Won the Pennant*.) The director, Barry Levinson, whose first film

was *Diner* (1982), understood from the start that this matter of tone was primary; he and his cinematographer, the talented Caleb Deschanel, have tried to move and light the film so as to suggest that the bright world of the diamond is surrounded by mysterious forces. We have all seen the blimp shots, now TV commonplaces, of a brilliantly lighted playing field surrounded by oceanic darkness. That may have been a guiding metaphor for the film; and, except that Levinson uses slow motion too predictably for emphases of both fact and fantasy, he fulfills it much of the time.

Second, the filmmakers have frankly faced commercial considerations and, to their purposes, have made those considerations serve them. Having altered and condensed and rearranged the materials as they did all along the line, they had no alternative but to give the film a happy ending; so they gave it one that, in pop terms, is good glow-making. Once this film story is launched as it is, it takes on its own artistic responsibilities; any unhappy ending would have been jarring, even more arbitrary than what we see. Kenneth Burke's famous dictum tells us that form is the arousal and satisfaction of expectation. George M. Cohan's earthy equivalent was that the audience writes the last act. Malamud purists will shriek at the ending, but they will have been shrieking long before that. Those who can accept the idea that this is not the novel, in order to see what pleasures they may get from the transformation, will get those pleasures.

Oddly, the pleasure that comes first to mind is a scene of two men shaving. Just before the game that will decide the pennant race, the Knights manager and his bench coach are shaving side by side in a locker-room mirror. The manager is Wilford Brimley, familiar now from *Tender Mercies* (1983) and *The Stone Boy* (1984). The coach is Richard Farnsworth, already beloved (I hope) because of *Comes a Horseman* (1978) and *The Grey Fox* (1982). Those two laconic codgers scraping away, saying things I can't even remember, exemplify the fact that the right people doing even commonplace things at the right time can make the screen interesting.

Or there's the scene in which Redford re-meets his boyhood sweetheart. He slips into a soda-fountain booth opposite her, and the first thing he says, after fifteen years, is, "Are you married?" (Malamud's line, transposed.) Redford's look at her implies the quick rush through his mind of everything that had been between them and that he is still able to hope; and leads him directly to the question he wants to ask even more than he wants to say hello. It's a subtle, lovely moment.

Or there's the recurring presence of Robert Duvall as an almost literally diabolical sportswriter, insisting that the past continues, that the wolves of mortal malice are always at the door.

Redford, making his first screen appearance in four years (too long!), reminds those who need reminding that he is one of the perfect male film stars. Like only a few other men—Paul Newman and Marcello Mastroianni—he is extraordinarily handsome, effortlessly fascinating, and enormously talented. His role here is not the most demanding of his career, not on the level of *The Candidate* and *Jeremiah Johnson* (both from 1972), but it gives us ample chance to see another kind of natural in his element.

Glenn Close is the boyhood sweetheart, and, once again, she works honestly and unappealingly. The costumes and settings tell us graphically that we are in the 1930s, but we would know it anyway: there's not a black man on any of the ball

teams. I didn't even see a black person in any of the ballpark crowds. (Was this why, at one of the ball club parties, they sing "Darktown Strutters' Ball"? Are we being told something about pre-Jackie-Robinson prejudice?)

Possibly I ought to feel guilty about not being more protective (as I often have been) of a novel by a good writer, but with all its alterations, the film *an sich* gave me some fun. Which underscores my chief critical dictum: criticism is less a matter of dicta than of instances.

Boogie Nights, Paul Thomas Anderson, 1997 (*The New Republic*, 10 November 1997)

The year is 1977 when *Boogie Nights* begins. Eddie Adams is a seventeen-year-old busboy in a San Fernando Valley nightclub when he is spotted by Jack Horner, a director of porno films. Horner, with the intuition that made him wealthy, senses potency and potential in Eddie. He quickly learns that Eddie has already earned some money sexually, so little persuasion is needed. Horner soon makes Eddie into a big porno star, under the name Dirk Diggler.

For us, however, he remains, most of the time, Eddie, a basically sweet naïf, doing what is asked of him sexually like an obliging peasant youth in Sade, except that he becomes mildly famous and well-off. His new life brings along many new people. First, there is Horner's girlfriend, a porno star called Amber Waves—in fact, she is Eddie's first on-camera lay. Then there is Rollergirl, a porno playmate who doesn't take off her roller skates for sex. And there is a large miscellany of others in and around the business, almost all of them druggies.

Some of the group's stories are tracked through the screenplay, with or without Eddie's involvement, much as was done in *Nashville* (1975) or *Pulp Fiction* (1994). This braiding device entails a bit of padding; still, as the film blasts along from 1977 to 1983, it cracks open its world. The finish fits out most of the strands with relatively pleasant conclusions. Only the ending of Eddie's story is a touch too neat. (And, too, there are a couple of murders along the way that the picture simply shrugs off.)

Boogie Nights was written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson. This is remarkable. Anderson's only previous film, *Hard Eight* (1996), was one of those strained independent films whose threadbare central idea wears out very soon. With *Boogie Nights* Anderson may have had help from the people who are always around an expensive production, but it has the temper of one person's ingenuity and energy. It's an extraordinary step forward from his first picture—a 152-minute film with almost no sags.

All this in spite of the fact that Anderson never quite achieves his presumable chief aim. This picture moves us into a terrain where the moral scale is unabashedly different from the rest of the world's, even the part that patronizes porn, and it asks us to accept that scale: its ambitions, judgments, loyalties, even its annual "Oscars." This acceptance never quite happens for us. When a porno production man finally kills his wife, who has frequently coupled with other men in public, and then kills himself, it's hard to feel the pathos that's intended. Why didn't he shoot her before? Or why did he bother now? When Amber, a divorcee, goes to law for visitation rights with her son and loses, her heartache doesn't quite reach us. Who would want a child to spend much time in her environment?

Yet, despite the film's distance from us, we are held. In part, of course, there's the sexual titillation: whether or not we're sated with porn, the way that those films are made still catches us. Mostly, however, our interest seems to connect with a shift in standards. Moral criteria have been replaced by stylistic ones. To put it another way, if *Boogie Nights* were poorly made and acted, its materials would make it intolerably tawdry. But it's so well done that we keep watching.

Film historians may already be at their computers, tapping away at this transition from the sin-suffer-repent of the past to the contemporary acceptance of almost anything if it's sufficiently well made. Of course there have been precedents in other arts for centuries. (Why is Courbet's *The Origin of the World*, a depersonalized close-up of female genitalia, hung in a museum instead of being copied and sold with *Hustler*? Because it's beautifully painted.) Now this license through quality reaches the most widely seen art on earth. What does this transition imply or—dread word—forebode? Tune in next century.

As is, *Boogie Nights* dazzles along. Two scenes stand out memorably. After Amber loses her plea for her son, she is in her lush bedroom talking with Rollergirl, who has problems of her own. The younger one, in tears, says she needs a mom, and the older one (not that old) hugs her as they cry and nestle together. The suggestions in this well-written scene are subtle and evocative. And there's a long scene toward the end where Eddie, temporarily in money trouble, takes part in a drug delivery and robbery. The place is the home of the rich Rahad Jackson, who is on a giggling high throughout, in his briefs and open robe. The scene is punctuated by the firecrackers that his Chinese companion keeps setting off; and the inevitably bloody outcome hovers invisibly in the air waiting to materialize. The whole scene plays like an insane ballet.

Anderson directs throughout with verve and fluency. His very enthusiasm spurs his talent to carry him over dangers. For instance, the several wild parties. Little is deader on screen than most wild parties, but Anderson makes them smooth, hip bacchanals, with variegated people winding through on their hedonistic way.

His ability, always clear, is at its clearest in his casting and directing of actors. Mark Wahlberg gives Eddie the precise note of unvicious amorality. (At the end we glimpse the reason for Eddie's success—his prodigious organ. At least we are to believe it's his.) Burt Reynolds seems to have invested his whole career in preparation for Jack Horner. Ease used as ethic, a seriousness that is meant to be transparent: these and all the other qualities that marked his unctuously inveigling performances lead directly to Jack, a man of a dependability that is limited only by self-interest, with an embrace that is part smother.

Julianne Moore, already distinguished not only by her gifts but by her daring choice of roles, is rightly regal as Amber. She is the queen of herself, moving through her life with the assurance of hermetically sealed values. Heather Graham, the Rollergirl, is pleasant as a human Barbie doll. Every other part, large or lesser, is cast precisely and taken to its utmost. A particular salute to the English actor, Alfred Molina, as Rahad, a carefully designed frenetic performance.

Three more salutes. Robert Elswit gets right to the texture of scene after scene, and thus gives the film itself a seductive luridness. Dylan Tichenor, the editor, knows exactly what we want to be looking at, a moment before we know it ourselves. And the music, old and new, tended by Michael Penn, is a jet propulsion

under it all.

Mrs. Dalloway, Marleen Gorris, 1997 (*The New Republic*, 9 March 1998)

Last week a film that was a free adaptation of a famous novel, Alfonso Cuarón's *Great Expectations* (1998); this week a film that clings close to a famous novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

That intelligent and inquiring English actress, Eileen Atkins, has been working on Virginia Woolf projects for almost ten years. First, Atkins did a one-woman adaptation of *A Room of One's Own*, which she played in London and New York and on tour, an inviting and lucid performance. Then Atkins made a theater piece, not exactly a play, out of the correspondence of Woolf and her lover, Vita Sackville-West. In New York, Atkins played Virginia and Vanessa Redgrave played Vita; and though the piece showed its lack of dramatic core, the skill and charm of the two performers made it a treat.

Atkins persists. Now she has made a screenplay of *Mrs. Dalloway* for Redgrave. Clearly Atkins recognized the problems in adapting this shimmery novel, but, alas, recognizing them is not enough. Those problems still obtrude.

Woolf's novel might be seen as a (much smaller) parallel to Joyce's *Ulysses*. By closely following one day in the life of one quite ordinary woman, the book includes a social tapestry, a political index, a theological position, and something of the history that had produced all these elements. Woolf knew Joyce's work (about which she had decidedly mixed feelings, especially because of Joyce's candor); but "stream of consciousness" technique was in the air at the time, and she might well have done what she did if Joyce had never existed.

That technique works wonderfully well in the novel; but it is not a comfortable film mode. The story deals with one June day in the London of 1923, from morning to the evening when Clarissa Dalloway gives a party in her house. She is wealthy and reticently elegant, the middle-aged wife of an M.P., a woman whose life is plainly pleasant and vacuous. Through her day of party preparations, several other stories wind. A former suitor of hers, Peter Walsh, returns after a long stay in India. He visits Clarissa, is still in some way affected by her, yet tells her of a current amorous involvement. And there is the story of a young man, a severely shell-shocked veteran of the Great War (as it was prematurely called), who has a devoted Italian wife. His story connects with Mrs. Dalloway because the physician who so signally fails to help him is a guest at her party that evening.

To accommodate the background of these and other encounters, Atkins has devised some flashback scenes, derived from Woolf. Also, those scenes serve the usual purpose of the past juxtaposed with the present, a pathos so inevitable that it hardly needs to be mentioned. When we see the young Peter asking the young Clarissa to marry him and thus break out of her cosseted life, when we see her opt instead for the quite conventional young Richard Dalloway, we understand how Clarissa's upbringing has crimped the possibilities for her life. She was reared to be a quite conventional lady, and that is what she has become.

This flashing-back is pretty to look at, and it flexes the narrative, but it works against the unification of the piece; and unification of the whole was patently what Woolf was after. Her prose makes the novel a holistic work even when the narrative shifts from one strand to another. This is impossible in the film,

where the shifts are exactly that, breaks from the centrality of Mrs. Dalloway's day.

There's a further disjuncture. Woolf's prose transmutes ordinary experience. One instance: when Big Ben strikes, she writes: "The leaden circles dissolved in the air." In the film we simply hear the bells. In a sense Woolf might just as well not have written as she did. Any of us can hear bells; only Woolf could have thus transfigured the sound, and the film cheats us of her.

This is not remotely to argue a fixed superiority of literature over film, but it is to suggest that some novels resist adaptation to the core of their beings. Further, it suggests that an actress-writer can fall so much in love with a fine novel that she overlooks her own experience and knowledge. (For a quite contrary example, see Emma Thompson's screenplay of *Sense and Sensibility* [1995].)

And, unfortunately, that is not all. Most of Mrs. Dalloway's activity during that June day is inner—things that she thinks and feels. Atkins knew this, of course, and tried to enrich the outer, visible woman with some voice-over quotations from her thoughts. But those few quotations never have, could not have, the wholeness of the contrapuntal feeling in the book, the sense that the woman whom the world sees has a more interesting, invisible self constantly attending her. And since Mrs. Dalloway is largely banal in her utterances, her dialogue is mostly tedious slivers of politesse: "Delighted that you could come," "How lovely to see you," and so on.

This condition puts a dreadful burden on Vanessa Redgrave. She has rarely had a role that demanded less of (let us please use the term) her genius. She moves through Mrs. Dalloway's house and the London streets like a great, beautiful ship sailing on urban seas, and when she speaks, she makes as much as she decently can of her clumps of standard chatter. If the role weren't in the hands of an actress who is being underused, it would be intolerable. But even Redgrave can't make Mrs. Dalloway, in this form, a fascinating woman.

Her clothes, designed by Judy Pepperdine, are unostentatiously lovely, especially the hats. In the pre-war flashback scenes, the clothes bespeak their period cleverly. And in those clothes, the performances of the young Clarissa and Peter and Richard are vividly . . . young. As the older Peter, Michael Kitchen carries nicely an air of regret plus hope.

But the most demanding performance, a demand well met, is by Rupert Graves as the unbalanced war veteran. This man's presence in both novel and film is obviously meant to give us a glimpse of the horror in the world through which Mrs. Dalloway has floated. Graves has to deal with abrupt swirls of mood and reality, and he does it movingly.

The director was Marleen Gorris, the Dutch woman whose last film of the five she has made, *Antonia's Line* (1995), was smoothly fulfilled. (Incidentally, Gorris did an M.A. at an English university, and she has some feeling for the country.) In her hands we can be sure that the feminist aspects of Woolf's work will not be slighted. More, Gorris understands the story, as, in the truest sense, a woman's work. The handicaps that she could not overcome are the implacable ones of the screenplay.

Life Is Beautiful, Roberto Benigni, 1997 (*The New Republic*, 23 November 1998)

Roberto Benigni, who co-wrote, directed, and stars in *Life Is Beautiful*, is

one of Italy's most popular comedians. Americans have had the chance to see him in Fellini's last film, *Voices of the Moon* (1990), and in two of Jim Jarmusch's films, *Down by Law* (1986) and *Night on Earth* (1991), in all of which he showed himself to be a skilled clown in the circus tradition—what can be called silhouette comedy, as against the combination of silhouette and interiority that marks Chaplin or Keaton.

Benigni's new film leaves the province in which we have seen him and moves into the Chaplin-Keaton area. He has made a comedy about a Nazi concentration camp. Actually, he has made half a film on that subject. Apparently he couldn't devise enough material to set the whole film in the camp, so he fills the first half of the picture with his slapstick (silhouette) adventures on the way to marriage and the begetting of the son who is the focus of the second half. And that second half requires acting—genuine acting—at which Benigni is not quite adept.

Benigni plays Guido, a Jewish waiter who, after marriage, opens a bookshop. He and his wife (Nicoletta Braschi) adore their small boy (Giorgio Cantarini). When all three are ultimately taken to the concentration camp, Guido gets the idea to pretend that the whole horror is a game—to soothe and to protect the boy. For instance, in the camp Guido persuades the boy that the heavy labor that is forced on the inmates is a contest in which all are trying to win points toward a prize.

If this idea grates somewhat in synopsis—and there are numerous others like it—it grates only a little less in the film itself, mitigated skimpily by Benigni's clowning, not by his acting. In the press notes he cites, as one of his inspirations for the film, a line from Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*. During his imprisonment Levi thinks: "What if all this were nothing but a joke? This cannot be true. . . ." But the cosmic reverberations of Levi's comment are reduced to the incredible and the distasteful in Benigni's mundane circus antics. Any repugnance we might feel is supposed to be swept away by the wash of paternal love, Guido's intent to protect his son from the facts. This protection is so blatantly impossible that the paternal love begins to seem theatrically phony. Even a small child (if he had been able to survive with his father) would have seen fairly soon that the object of the camp was not to have fun, a fact that renders Benigni's idea much less a moving instance of love than an actor's shallow conceit. Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties* (1975) wrung some grim comedy out of a concentration camp—without whimsy. Benigni certainly knew the risk he was taking with his idea, but the circumstances overwhelm him.

Theater into Cinema

The Balcony, Joseph Strick, 1963 (*The New Republic*, 23 March 1963)

Jean Genet's play *The Balcony* has a considerable history of adaptation in its short life. It was first published in 1956 in fifteen scenes; it was subsequently published in 1960 in nine scenes. (This is the version available in the U.S. in translation.) Its first production was in English—London, 1957—over the author's violent protests about the way it was produced. It was first presented in New York, Off-Broadway, in March 1960 and was condensed before the opening; it was presented in France the following May and was again condensed after the opening. It has now been radically adapted for the screen and has been filmed Off-Hollywood.

The Balcony is the name of a brothel in an unidentified country that is torn by revolt. This brothel, an imaginatively equipped palace of illusion, is an observation post from which the bloodshed and struggle can be watched; and the fantasies that the clients act out with the girls are caricatures of the world outside. Three regular customers have always enacted a bishop, a judge, a general, and in a moment of crisis they have to masquerade as such in the real world. The chief of police, busy suppressing the rebels, takes time to visit the madam, who is his mistress. One of his frustrations is that no client has yet wanted to impersonate him. The rebel leader appears toward the end and asks to impersonate the chief. At the conclusion of his scene with a girl, the leader castrates himself. The characters disperse. The revolt is either a success or a failure; it is not clear. The madam addresses the audience: "You must now go home, where everything—you can be quite sure—will be even falser than here."

Even this stripped summary discloses that the play is a fantasy on themes of power and of relative values, as mirrored in extreme rituals of sex. Genet's plays have been shoved into the hastily convoked Theater of the Absurd, but they do not belong there. Both before and after *The Balcony*, he has shown himself a poetic dramatist of social protest. The modes of meaninglessness—of Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Adamov—are remote from this man, whose life and work have been acts of assault, hatred of degraded ideals. There is cruelty in the Absurdists, but there is little hate. Hate is impossible without ideals, and ideals are impossible in the theater's current *reductio ad Absurdum*.

The screenplay of *The Balcony*, by Ben Maddow, tries to slice down to the themes of the original, articulating them somewhat differently. In a narrow sense the script is an improvement. Genet poses vivid situations, then does not develop them dramatically. For example, each of the clients' scenes begins startlingly, but after one has perceived both the fetish and its symbolism, which takes about a

minute, nothing further comes of the scene but verbal embroidery on the initial situation. On a larger scale the play could be summed up the same way: it is a basically startling and promising image that is not successfully developed. One does not ask for copybook maxims from a poetic drama, but on Genet's own terms, the metaphors do not generate sufficient tension, do not grow and burst, as the act of drama should. The best effects are those of lyric poetry, which has only to establish striking figures in apposition and need not do much more with them.

Maddow, sensing this, has tried to impose stricter form and direction on the material, has shortened and simplified. Thus some of the theatrical tedium has been excised, but, inevitably, so has much of the imagery and idea. If Genet had shaped the work better, it would be a better play; Maddow's shaping only makes it more streamlined. And, while altering, Maddow has added mere gags (the general settles his bill with a credit card); and he has disrupted the tone of the work by fluctuating between bitter fantasy and broad satire. The police chief makes a jabberwocky radio address; the three fake officials make a farcical triumphant tour by car and pay a meaningless visit to the morgue; the castration is omitted, and the chief and the rebel fight—stopped only by the whores' stripping them naked at the madam's orders.

Yet this same script might have become a more satisfying film in the hands of a more gifted director. Joseph Strick, who previously made the sophomoric *Savage Eye* (1960), has little knowledge of acting, a trite pictorial eye, and less sense of tone than his scriptwriter. Under the titles we see a montage of newsreel shots: street riots, raging mobs. From this scary reality we switch to the brothel, which does not seem to be related even in fantasy to this grainy newsreel world. (When the three fakers later ride through the streets, the newsreel shots, which had previously been used with the grimmest reality, are now used for Chaplinesque effects.) Within the chimerical brothel itself, the film is handled without evocative poetic effect. The camera is factual; it needed the touch of a Cocteau.

Strick cannot help insecure actresses like Joyce Jameson and Arnette Jens, and he has miscast Ruby Dee. Peter Falk, an actor of guttural capabilities, is never allowed to make the police chief either a power symbol with comic facets or a Marx Brothers butt. Shelley Winters, the madam, is much too earthbound to be an Earth Mother. We could believe her as a madam in Toledo or Tulsa, not as the archetypal madam of Nowhere and Everywhere. However, the film does give substantial opportunity to that shamefully neglected actress, Lee Grant, who plays the madam's lesbian friend. How prodigally wasteful our theater and films are, not to offer fuller scope to this fine actress.

The merits of the picture, which exist, must not be scanted. It is worth applauding the elementary fact that it was made, that something was done—even if it was adapting a French play—to keep American films at least vaguely in touch with what is happening in the rest of the world. More positively, after all the faults have been noted, the picture contains a residuum of the suggestive ambiguities of Genet's play. And it conveys some sense of sex as ambience, sex not merely as the pleasures of the bed but as a pervasive force, a medium for mysteries, revelations, fulfillments.

The Sea Gull, Sidney Lumet, 1968 (*The New Republic*, 11 January 1969)

From the very first moment of *The Sea Gull*, it's clear that Sidney Lumet doesn't know what to do and so is going to do lots and lots of things. Long shots of scenery, a girl—presumably Nina—galloping a horse on the other side of the lake. Insecure, irrelevant, just pretty. Then, in utter distortion of the play, we see Masha and Medvedenko in a little sexual tussle in the grass. Somehow they manage to slide from this tussle into the somber opening lines, and we are off. Far off. Lumet apparently wanted to make his outdoor scenes Beautiful. (This time he's imitating *Elvira Madigan* [1967].) Mostly he makes them look like indoor sets. And the post-recording of the outdoor scenes has a dead studio sound.

Lumet's furiously energetic, tin cleverness would be partially redressed if the performances were good. They are not. As Madame Arkadina, Simone Signoret (peace to the ashes of her earlier self) is ludicrous, a plump lady who cannot speak English and who, in close-up, looks like a badly painted clown. James Mason, at his most profound, makes Trigorin sound merely peevish. Harry Andrews, as Sorin, barks as if he were still at the Battle of Balaclava in *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968). David Warner, the Treplev, continues to mistake biliousness for sensitivity. Denholm Elliott is unfocused as Dorn (and is atrociously wigged). Kathleen Widdoes and Alfred Lynch, as Masha and Medvedenko, are acceptable. Ronald Radd, as her father, is not.

The major disappointment is Vanessa Redgrave's Nina. I had read of her in the part on the London stage in the early 1960s and looked forward to her in this picture. Now she is too old to play Nina—on film, at any rate. Redgrave has the technique and range to cope with what few modern actresses could manage: the high-flying play-within-a-play. And her confession to Treplev of her love for Trigorin, after what the latter has done to her, is moving. But most of the time I felt that she was trying for the girlishness, the *newness*, of Nina, and the strain seemed to unsettle her.

The poor performances, combined with Lumet's defective rhythmic sense and camerawork, make the film tedious. This isn't hard with Chekhov, who is far from actor-proof even on the stage—where he belongs; but it makes this film dislocation all the more gratuitous. For a last treat Lumet distorts the ending. Dorn discovers Treplev's body outside, then he returns to the group sitting about the table. The camera moves slowly from face to face as everyone's unspoken knowledge of the tragedy is implied. Chekhov wanted only a moment of apprehension as Dorn goes out to investigate the noise; when he returns and lies about the cause, the triviality of the lotto game is to continue, while Dorn takes Trigorin aside and tells him quietly what has happened. Lumet gives us a general Great Realization. Chekhov wanted life resumed with the fact of death slipped in on the periphery. But since Lumet began with a distortion, why shouldn't he end with one?

A Doll's House, Patrick Garland, 1973 (*The New Republic*, 2 June 1973)

With *A Doll's House* we are back with questions raised, hardly for the first time, by the recent Soviet film of *Uncle Vanya* (1971). Is there such a thing as a good film of a major play? Allowing for arguable exceptions like the films of *Henry*

V (1944) and *Pygmalion* (1938), I think the answer is still no. The better the play, the less alterable the form. What we get here are some swatches of Ibsen, scissored apart, with some gussets of transition and transposition inserted, and the whole renovation stitched together again. And, as is the way with film adaptations, although stuff is inserted, the whole altered thing is smaller than the original. This film runs about ninety minutes.

It was made for two reasons: first, the topicality of the theme; second, the success that Claire Bloom, the star, has had as Nora in New York and then London. (Another film is coming with Jane Fonda as Nora.) As to the first reason, it's dubious. I think the play is as much a struggle against nineteenth-century dramaturgy as against nineteenth-century marriage, but it does have some size; and that size is reduced by harping on topicality.

Others have pointed out, rightly, that *A Doll's House* could have been about either Nora or Torvald; it is really about marriage, not the oppression of women. Indeed, five years after the play was written, the first great writer to discuss it, August Strindberg, argued vigorously that Ibsen had proved the direct opposite of what he intended to prove. (See the preface to Strindberg's collection of stories titled *Getting Married*, newly translated by Mary Sandbach and recently published by Viking.) Even granting Strindberg's biases, his argument delivers a jolt. In any event the play still creaks and cranks along, driven through its mechanics only by the great mind that knew all along how it would end.

Claire Bloom proves again that she is a much better actress on screen than on stage: to put it properly, she is good on film and weak on stage. I've seen her in this and several other plays, I've even gone to a solo poetry recital of hers, and never has she had a trace of *command*, let alone of conviction. Her voice and person simply are not able to cope with space. On film, with a compressed environment, with an opportunity to work almost completely for "interiorness," she is truthful and at ease. On film she looks a bit old for Nora, which she didn't on stage; but here, insofar as the shredded script permits, she can more clearly paint in the character's substructure: her concept of Nora as consciously playing her little squirrel tricks, debasing herself deliberately to play the little wifey-pifey for Torvald, so that when she changes, we can see her throw off a role rather than suddenly alter character.

Anthony Hopkins bulges forcefully as Torvald and cracks credibly. Denholm Elliott, who was a fine Judge Brack in *Hedda Gabler* at the Royal Court last summer, is an equally fine Krogstad here. Anna Massey is a reedily affecting Mrs. Linde, and Ralph Richardson delights as Dr. Rank.

Christopher Hampton made the screenplay from his own reasonably limber stage version. Patrick Garland, like Bloom, gains from the move to film. His direction on stage was like Schubert operetta *réchauffé.* He is much better off with less space to live in, moment by moment, and with enforced control of the audience's eyes.

***Equus*, Sidney Lumet, 1977 (*The New Republic*, 5 November 1977)**

Lionel Trilling, if I may drop a name, came to dinner a few years ago, shortly after he had seen the Broadway production of *Equus*. "Have you written about it?"

he asked. Yes, I said. "Pro or con?" he asked anxiously. Con. Ease suffused his beautiful face, and dinner proceeded happily.

Trilling and I—forgive the conjunction—were in the minority. The play had been a tremendous success in London at the National, had been hailed in New York before it came here by touring New York critics avid for middle-seriousness, and had then opened in the City to praise and profits. It's probably still playing somewhere in the United States. What bothered Trilling was not the play's success—success or failure was not his professional interest—but its ecstatic critical reception. Like all good critics he remained naïve in one way at least: he never could reconcile himself to the fact that inferior work often gets high praise. (I've never known a good critic who was really cynical. The good ones are outraged by bad criticism the thousandth time as much as the first time.)

Now comes the film of *Equus*. Now among the manifold reasons why I wish Trilling were still alive is a trifling one—I could tell him that the film exposes the play. I have no clue as to whether the film will be a success, but I risk one prediction: the film will impose less than the play. The acting, even Sidney Lumet's direction, may be praised, but the dubiousness of the material will be more apparent. And this drew me to think of past occasions when transposition to film has been like an acid bath revealing the lead in allegedly golden plays—Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Kopit's *Indians* are only two examples—and then to explore why this happens. I don't mean plays that make bad films because they're badly filmed: Terence McNally's *The Ritz* is a better-than-average farce, but its better-than-average film director, Richard Lester, doesn't know how to handle stage material. I mean precisely the way that the film form searches out flabbiness and thinness in material that, in the theater, has been thought substantial.

Often this is because techniques that seemed impressive in the theater are stripped away or reduced to commonplaces by the very form of film. The time-interweavings in *Salesman*, the heavy-breathing sleight of hand in *Indians*—these are such commonplaces of film discourse that they couldn't possibly aggrandize the material on screen. So the film medium revealed that the material under the wrappings was: (a) separable from the wrappings, which in good art would not be the case; (b) less than it had seemed when wrapped.

In *Equus* on the stage, the central metaphor was a boxing ring, into which the actors for each scene stepped from the sidelines. The encounters between the psychiatrist and the boy who had blinded six horses were seen as bouts, probably—since the recurrent motif in the doctor's mind is ancient Greece—intended to have some of the flavor of classic pugilism. The horses were represented by six young men in skin-tight costumes with wire-frame horse heads and *cothurni*. All this symbolic accoutrement was necessity changed into device. The boxing ring was a way of theatrical containment and of abstraction. And, since six real horses were somewhat out of the question, the men-as-horses suggested both the sleek physicality of the beasts and the underlay of unacknowledged homosexuality that pervaded the boy's problem.

These devices gave the play, for many, an air of the poetically profound; but these devices were ruled out by the transposition to film. Symbolism has often been used in films and sometimes by masters—Cocteau and Bergman, for examples—but usually it has been symbolism conceived in cinematic modes, and

it has very rarely been used in expensive pictures aimed at the massiest mass market. The mass *theater* audience is not only much smaller numerically than the mass film audience, it begins at a somewhat higher stratum of intellectual-artistic sophistication. (As I've noted before, there is no longer a truly popular theater audience corresponding in kind to the immense broad base of the film audience.) The Broadway audience and its counterparts elsewhere rather enjoy, from time to time, a bit of comfy derrière-garde experimentation and non-realism—Michael Cristofer's *The Shadow Box* is a current instance. One of the reasons for the success of *Equus*, I'm convinced, was its assurance to theater audiences that they had been tested imaginatively—and had passed!

There's none of this in the film version. Not only because the biggest part of the audience would be discomfited by it but because the film medium itself would be discomfited by it. Nothing is easier to the film than to include many places, so the boxing-ring idea would seem artificial. Real horses, easy to manage with cutting and re-takes, push the idea of symbolic horses into the trashcan. Even the most subtle viewer would find these symbols hard to credit in a film.

So the film is stripped of its theater paraphernalia. And the script must therefore rearrange the time planes. For the most part we don't get the past as, for the most part, we got it in the play: through the boy's remembering "now" of what happened "then." The film goes to the past in conventional flashback, converting the past into another "now." This makes patent nonsense of what was dreamily disguised nonsense in the play. We see the boy—again, as in the play, well acted by Peter Firth—behaving moonily and loonily with real horses *before* he commits the atrocities, instead of remembering his past behavior moonily and loonily after he commits them. This is to make the boy a very visible clinical case right from his first appearance. He is so immediately weird that his parents seem dense not to notice it, and the girl's sexual interest in him becomes highly bizarre. The film changes the play's intended mystery about the boy's explosion into a flat inevitability, highly predictable by everyone around.

The film does even worse, in a different way, for the psychiatrist. (Played by Richard Burton with more to work on than in *The Exorcist II* [1977] but with about equal professional sincerity.) The play's various devices tried to give the doctor at least a base for his own agony—his envy of the boy's passion. In the film the present-tense re-creation of the past makes the doctor's envy, which was clearly silly to some of us in the theater, now glaringly clear. Here is a doctor a great deal sicker than his patient—not deprived of passion but sick. Because what the doctor is envying here is, obviously, not passion but psychosis.

And the loading of the dice by the author, Peter Shaffer, is much more conspicuous here. The boy has been assigned to a doctor who is having a frigid marital life. In the play it was plain enough that if the doctor were happily married, the whole thesis would crumble. In the film, the contrivance of choosing just this one doctor seems much clumsier, and the whole jerry-built pseudo-Laurentian comment on the lack of ecstasy in modern life utterly collapses.

But the film medium reveals the spuriousness in spurious plays by more than the stripping away of theatrical devices. Sometimes a poor play has no such devices: it tries to make its way by conviction of realism. Then we get such films as *The Subject Was Roses* (1968) and *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* (1972)—both made from Pulitzer Prize plays—where what seemed like verisimilitude in the theater shows up as artifice, or mere banality.

The film medium *begins* realer than the theater: it eats such plays for breakfast before it gets down to the day's realistic work. It's like putting a ten-power photograph under a 1,000-power viewer and discovering that the photo is insufficiently microscopic or touched up. With *Equus* it wasn't a case of beginning with gritty realism. The necessities of film "reduced" the play to realism, and that second-stage realism simply doesn't stand up under the camera. Put it another way: if there had never been a play called *Equus*, the film still wouldn't ring true.

What does this mean about the relative truth and value of the two arts as such? Absolutely nothing. Some good plays become good films (*The Homecoming*, 1973), some good plays become bad films (*Long Day's Journey into Night*, 1962), some bad plays become good films (*Way Down East*, 1920). About the reverse flow—from film to stage—there's much less to say for the obvious reason that, in historical sequence, the theater has been much more of a source for films than vice versa. The few instances I know of the reverse flow have been deplorable: *Sweet Charity*, *Sugar*, *Rashomon*, *A Little Night Music*. (The last is soon to return as a film!) They showed, not surprisingly, that the film has its own untranslatable systems of felicities and disguises, that the theater's peculiar strengths can sometimes cripple even a healthy film script. But a trash-detection factor in the theater, analogous with what I've been discussing above, doesn't really apply because I can't think of an original screenplay as poor as the *Equus* film adaptation that has been reworked for the stage.

As the century moves on, a fascinating subject opens up more and more: the aesthetic relations/differences between theater and film. Last spring I looked into the subject with a group of CUNY graduate students. The first thing we learned is that the literature is skimpy. André Bazin's two-part essay "Theater and Cinema" is a locus for stimulating argument, not for veneration. James Hurt's anthology *Focus on Film and Theater* is very valuable but necessarily limited. Just about the last thing we learned is that, increasingly, a true basic duality has been growing in creative people. Talents coming to maturity these days do not often think of themselves arbitrarily as either playwrights or screenwriters: both arts seem linked, interactive, wonderfully identical, wonderfully different. Even if a writer does choose one or the other, the basic linkage must remain, in the last quarter of this century. No matter how much a playwright may loathe film, he cannot write for the theater today without awareness of the film's effect on vision, rhythm, and realism. No matter how much a screenwriter may disregard the theater, he cannot (if he's serious) disregard what the best modern dramatists have wrought—in strophes of dialogue, surgeries of character, spectrums of imagination. I can't imagine that Terrence Malick's script for *Badlands* (1973) or Éric Rohmer's scripts for several of his *Moral Tales* (1963-72) would be as they are if Beckett and the so-called Theater of the Absurd hadn't existed.

The subject is rosy. And has really only begun to be cultivated. I describe it here to prevent any misconception about the intent of this piece. I'm not remotely interested in ranking the two arts. I am interested, and *Equus* brings it up again, in this X-ray detector action of the film form on some overrated plays: in showing up the outlines of *papier-mâché* arty décor, in penetrating the surface of superficial realism. Whatever the success of this picture, at least the film version of *Equus* must show a larger number of people that there is less in the work than met the theater audience's eye.

The Elephant Man, David Lynch, 1980 (*The New Republic*, 18 October 1980)

The first minute of *The Elephant Man* is awful. So it's a surprise that the next half hour or so is pretty good. But the rest of it is almost as bad as the opening.

That first minute shows us, mistily, John Merrick's mother being frightened by an elephant when she was pregnant. As an explanation of his disfigurement—which he believes—it's scientifically loony, and as film, it's ludicrous. Then, for a while, the camera of Freddie Francis, guided by the director David Lynch, gives us the dank brick of Victorian London so graphically that we feel rubbed against it. (Properly, the whole film is in black and white. Francis and Lynch clearly studied Victorian photographs carefully.) Through this section the screenplay by Christopher DeVore, Eric Bergren, and Lynch is laying out its ground vividly enough; but when it wants to swing into action, it doesn't. It repeats and drags, seems only tenuously impelled by an idea, is written in flabby language.

The script is not based on Bernard Pomerance's now well-known play; both are derived from the same factual sources. Pomerance's play, I continue to think, has merit. There's some sogginess in the dialogue, some patness in arrangement, some imbalance in structure. (The real drama is in Treves, the doctor, not in Merrick, who is only a victim without possibilities; but Merrick is so much more eye-catching that Treves fades.) Still Pomerance uses some deft ellipses, some nice irony—in, for instance, Merrick's building of a model of the church across the way; and much of the writing is astringent, tart, suggestive.

The screenplay's dialogue has, comparatively, no flavor at all: it's merely loose talk. (And "contact" is used as a verb in 1884. There's a reference to "The London *Times*"—in London.) The church model becomes just a hobby. The visits of the star actress, Mrs. Kendal, which in the play were at least theatrically effective, are stupid. (And Mrs. Kendal is played by Anne Bancroft, right off the Bronx subway. Her husband, Mel Brooks, was one of the backers.)

The play, well or less well, grapples with an immense theme: the arbitrariness of life, its lack of design or reason, posed against what we are capable of expecting. "Man's great blessing/curse, the gift of logic," (to quote myself), "keeps ramming into the illogic of existence." The film, nebulously, barely visibly, is about a lesser but good idea: man's fear of that arbitrariness, a fear that takes derisive or "scientific" or sanctimonious form. The night porter at Merrick's hospital sells places to pub pals to peer at the Elephant Man. (Dreadfully heavy-handed direction in those scenes.) Treves gets professional status by discovering and exhibiting Merrick, and Treves's hospital gets renown by sheltering him. Society, even royalty, brings gifts and feels noble about it. All these are ways of gaping in fear at a gap in the design of existence. But this theme is not cultivated and harvested. After it's set, it's just reiterated over and over until the fact of iteration obscures it. (And what was the significance of all that smoke issuing from factories and trains and steamers? Is *any* visual theme a valid theme?)

John Hurt, behind a swollen helmet of makeup, does as well as possible in the title role, though his inflections are a bit subtle for a man who has spoken so little. The play deals better with both face and voice. The stage Merrick wears no makeup at all: he contorts his body to suggest disfigurement. Thus we avoid getting used to the horror, and thus symbolically we can accept Merrick's supple

discourse out of symbolic grotesqueness. In the film he could not be barefaced: the camera leaves no room for that kind of imagining; yet the lumpy twisted head soon becomes just one more horror-flick getup, and the drawing-room dialogue issuing from it is faintly comic.

What the film of *The Elephant Man* proves, I think, is that this idea really belongs in the theater.

The Dresser, Peter Yates, 1983 (*The New Republic*, 12 December 1983)

Surprise. I saw Ronald Harwood's play *The Dresser* in London in 1980 and wasn't greatly taken by it. I saw it again on Broadway a year later, hoping that a major cast change would help. It did, but not enough. I went to the film more in duty than hope and was nicely surprised. The script is essentially what it was, a theatrical *tour de force* about the theater with more *tour* than *force*, but now there's Albert Finney. His performance not only enriches the role he has taken over, it improves the balance of the piece. Finney can't rid the work of its fundamental vanity, but he certainly gives it more life along the way, and he does it in a style with a particular reward for anyone interested in acting.

During the 1950s Harwood spent seven years in the theatrical company of Donald Wolfit, as actor but part of the time as Wolfit's dresser, and out of that experience Harwood has written both a biography of Wolfit and this play. Americans know Wolfit chiefly through his substantial supporting roles in films—such as the girl's tycoon father in *Room at the Top* (1959)—but in the British theater he was a star who headed his own touring company, specializing in Shakespeare.

In *The Dresser* Harwood drew on his Wolfit experience for character and atmosphere only; it's not strictly factual. For instance, the play/film takes place in wartime Britain, January 1942, in a small town, before, during, and after a performance of *King Lear* by the knighted star, on what turns out to be the last day of his life. He is supposed to have played Lear hundreds of times before. But Wolfit didn't play his first Lear until six months after the date of the play, wasn't knighted until 1957, and died (in a hospital) in 1968. These differences deliberately keep the script from being taken too biographically, but nothing can—or is meant to—keep it from conveying the flavor of the man and his theater.

The basic structural twist is familiar: a shift of the spotlight from the expected protagonist to a peripheral figure. Some previous examples: *Napoleon's Barber* (filmed by John Ford in 1928) and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.* Harwood has taken the hero-valet combination and, if he doesn't concentrate exclusively on the valet, at least he shows how important the latter is to the hero. Harwood draws both these characters with intimacy and skill, and he sketches in the others adroitly—the star's wife, the quietly adoring spinster stage manager, the differently pathetic members of the company. The dialogue is neatly turned. The trouble is that, despite the script's various virtues, it comes at last to only one more *agon* about the Agony of It All—the strain of being a star performer on whom the vampiric public feeds. I know of few subjects more tedious.

The protagonist in past films on this theme has moved from actor (*A Star Is Born*, 1937, 1954, 1976) to rock singer (*The Rose*, 1979). Those films are always

telling us how the public uses up the star cruelly, but whatever the specific subject, the idea is vain. It may be true, even for the best artists, but it's no more true than for many doctors or teachers or social workers or any professionals on whom many others depend greedily, even selfishly. These other professions don't in themselves provide media for self-glorification, as the performer's profession does. To me, the strain is part of the game. A star's sufferings move me just about as much as a President's complaint about overwork after years of campaigning to get the job.

Harwood has had an instinct about the defect in the theme and has tried to buffer it by setting the play in wartime. The star thus can wave the banner of duty: he is fighting the barbarians with his own means, by taking Shakespeare to every corner of the embattled island; and his effort to pull his racked self together and perform can thus be seen—through his own eyes anyway—as something more than "the show must go on." But it's just wartime camouflage for perennial histrionism. The last day of an actor who summons himself to give what may have been his best performance before dying in his dressing room is, at the end, nothing more than that. It has no reach or resonance. It's just an exercise in self-pity before a backstage mirror

Finney, however, embellishes the texture. In London the star was played by Freddie Jones, who supplied little more than the plummy quality. In New York a much better actor, Paul Rogers, gave the part greater range but, within the structure, he couldn't enlarge the play sufficiently In the screen adaptation Harwood has given the star more "space," and Finney fills it. Filling it, he alters the balance to the film's benefit.

Besides, Finney does something that neither Jones nor Rogers did: he models his performance of the star on Wolfit himself. As it happens, I saw Wolfit's Lear (New York, 1947), but I don't think experience of Wolfit is a prerequisite to appreciating what Finney does. It's clear that he's not giving us Finney, as he has done engagingly in many films and as he did less engagingly in *Hamlet* on the London stage: he is creating, with himself, someone distinct from himself. Wolfit subscribed wholesouledly to what he called the "unfashionable theater," with a large-scale style that is too often glibly confused with hamminess. If Finney has a fault in this film, it's that confusion: the segments of his Lear that we see are somewhat broadened. But as the actor himself, the offstage man who goes onstage to speak those lines, Finney does a work of imaginative transformation, with the perception that an actor who spends his time in great roles, often regal ones, sometimes loses sight of where the stage ends and the so-called real world begins.

Tom Courtenay plays Norman, the dresser, as he did in London and New York, and it's a flawlessly turned performance. But that's what it was at the start. Courtenay is as rhythmically tidy, touchingly effeminate, understandably vindictive, and fiercely loyal as he was three years ago. In the film, because of the extension of the "Wolfit" role and Finney's power in it, Courtenay has to bear less of the weight, which helps. This is no reflection on Courtenay. If the soul's turmoil of an actor pulling himself together for a performance is less generally fascinating than theater people think, the travails of his dresser in maneuvering him are even less so. Courtenay is better off here for sharing the burden.

Another pleasant surprise is the direction of Peter Yates. Most of what I've seen of his, from *Bullitt* (1968) to *Eyewitness* (1981), has been consecrated to the ideal of flash, of dazzle. Here he simply places his film, which is about acting, at the

service of his actors. There's no trickery, no egotistical director's attention-grabbing. He puts his camera at every moment where it will be of most use to the moment and to us. He keeps it close much of the time, not for immense close-ups but because the faces are what the film is about. If a director hasn't developed a style through which a film can move to its truth, and Yates hasn't, his best course is to be invisible, which is what Yates does effectively here.

Henry IV, Marco Bellocchio, 1984 (*The New Republic*, 24 June 1985)

> Pirandello's importance seems to me of an intellectual and moral nature, i.e., a cultural rather than an artistic one: he sought to introduce into popular culture the "dialectic" of modern philosophy, in contrast to the Aristotelian-Catholic mode of conceiving "the objectivity of reality."

Thus Antonio Gramsci, who was a theater critic for four years in his late twenties. (Later, in his *Letters from Prison*, he said that he had written enough about Pirandello in those years to make a book.) I venture to agree with Gramsci on the locus of Pirandello's importance, most clearly in *Henry IV*. Many commentators compare that play with *Hamlet*, a comparison that, for me, only underscores Gramsci's view. The lasting worth of *Henry IV* is not in its intrinsic artistic vitality but in its exploration of reality. No such choice is possible with *Hamlet*.

An Italian film of *Henry IV* brings the subject up. It stars Marcello Mastroianni and was directed by Marco Bellocchio, who made the adaptation with Tonino Guerra, celebrated for his work with Antonioni. The names bristle with promise, but it is not kept. And after all the film's faults are noted, the central broken promise is Pirandello's.

To remind you: the time is today, in a castle. Twenty years earlier, a wealthy man (never named) was dressed for a carnival as Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, when he fell from his horse and hit his head. Apparently this man then became deluded that he *was* Henry IV and, with the support of his family, has been living in eleventh-century dress, attended by appropriately dressed servants. The present action of the play includes the woman he once loved in vain; her nineteen-year-old daughter, who is her youthful image; the woman's lover, who may have pricked Henry's horse on that fateful day; and a psychiatrist who visits Henry with them. The doctor's intent is to stage a shock that may bring Henry to his senses, but the result is that Henry—who has not always been as deluded as he seemed and who has partly taken refuge in his "affliction"—stabs the lover in a frenzy, and is now sealed into his delusion.

The oddity of the film is that it does something of what I think the play needs, and still it doesn't succeed. In my minority view, the last act of the play is the only material of genuine interest. A two-minute choric prologue could easily replace the previous two acts of tortuous exposition and padding. The screenplay, made for Italian television, though it doesn't follow this prescription, greatly condenses the acts leading to the climax; yet the work isn't saved. It remains a demonstration of views of reality, not a gripping drama.

Mastroianni struggles with the role of Henry—rather, he keeps struggling to struggle. Throughout the film he seems to be reaching for substance to engage him and test him, substance that he can probe and crack open. All he seems able

to find is a series of attitudes, admittedly somewhat more interesting than in several lesser films of his where he has been tempted to loaf. He isn't loafing here, but neither does his performance create the ark of mysteries that he and Pirandello wanted.

Bellocchio began his career smashingly with such strong films as *Fists in the Pocket* (1965), *China Is Near* (1967), and *In the Name of the Father* (1972). Lately he has lapsed into ambiguous vacuities like *Leap into the Void* (1980) and *The Eyes, the Mouth* (1982). Pirandello hasn't helped him. The film adaptation puts in a couple of subtle touches to help the play-acting theme: when Henry falls from his horse (in flashback), he doesn't really strike his head hard; after he stabs his old rival and the wounded man is taken out, we see that Henry has used a trick, collapsible sword. But Bellocchio doesn't significantly use this "performance": his direction fragments into unwieldy bits. Any overview he may have of the work is never realized.

More Pirandello may be coming our way. While I was in Cortona last August, a company was in the vicinity shooting a film based on his novel *The Late Mattia Pascal*, starring Mastroianni. Despite the disappointment above, I hope the new one arrives.

Plenty, Fred Schepisi, 1985 (*The New Republic*, 30 September 1985)

The exceptionally gifted David Hare has made a screen adaptation of his play *Plenty*, and quite evidently began with decisions about form. To understand those decisions, a glance first at the play. It deals with an Englishwoman named Susan Traherne: her exaltation during her underground war service as a late teenager in France, 1943-44; her anticipation of splendid change in the postwar world; her growing disappointments; her various jobs; her various grabs at personal fulfillment, including a rocky marriage; her decline into mental shakiness and a threat of utter dissolution. It ends with a retrospective glimpse of her in France, August 1944, exultant at victory.

The play's power (despite some faults discussed later) lay not only in its concise dialogue and sharp characterizations but in its very shape. In a postscript to the published play Hare wrote: "I planned a play in twelve scenes, in which there would be twelve dramatic actions." Part of his plan was to breach chronological order at the start. The play begins in 1962, then goes back to 1943 so that we see the young committed Susan only after we have had a hint of her postwar fate. Another effect of Hare's plan is that the very shapes of the twelve scenes are mimetic of the dialogue, tense and astringent. The play is, so to speak, shaped the way it sounds.

I see no intrinsic reason why the play could not have been filmed pretty much in that form or cluster of forms, allowing for some cinematic easements at the joins. This was done well (to choose two examples) with Pinter's *The Caretaker* (film, 1963) and *The Homecoming* (film, 1973). I can easily see the commercial reasons for converting the play into a more "producible" item. I don't mean explicit betrayal of ideas: I'm speaking only of form, though of course form is aesthetically connected with those ideas. The story is now lined up in strict chronology, except for the closing flashback; this takes care of any worries about confusing a film audience, but it seriously diminishes that first wartime scene.

Almost everything implicit in the play is now spelled out in the film. When Susan gets her first postwar job, utterly prosaic, we see the dingy office. When she's working in advertising and quits in the middle of a dog-food commercial, we are given the inanities in detail as if we needed proof that Susan is superior to them. When her husband, a foreign-service officer, is posted to the Middle East, we go there. (Said to be Jordan but shot in Tunisia. The producers weren't going to miss *that* visual chance, irrelevant though it is.) The argument for such adaptation of a play—not arbitrarily true—is that to confine the action to a few rooms, more or less, is uncinematic. Another argument, incontrovertibly true, is that one can't get many production values out of a film confined to a few rooms. And everyone concerned with *Plenty* wanted to transform it into a big picture for a big star.

The basic problems of Hare's extraordinary play persist, even grow, in the film. It's hard to believe that a person of Susan's mind could have been so deluded by the excitements of war as to forget history: to forget that no war has ever been followed by the complete realization of the aims for which it was fought, or nominally fought. We know that war experience often proves to be the high point of many people's lives, but that's quite a different matter. Further, *Plenty* strikes me as a political work with the political credo omitted. Hare, alone or in collaboration, has written plays with radical political views. Here he criticizes strongly a self-gratifying society and a stodgy government but does so almost peripherally. And now, the revised, bloated structure of the film only emphasizes the play's flaws. Susan seems even more ethically and intellectually slothful, a woman waiting for the good *not* to happen so that she can take refuge first in bitterness, then in recurrent "mental" episodes. She looks down disdainfully from unearned elevation. (Her war experiences were brave but scarcely unique.)

This makes the film sentimental, where the play, though flawed, was not. Hare underscores that sentimentality in two ways particularly. In the first wartime scene Susan meets a British agent who tells her that his chief gave him a pair of cuff links for good luck. This is in the play. In the film we go back with them to her room in the French village, where the pair sleep together. When he has to rush off suddenly on a mission, he leaves the cuff links as a memento. From then on, she keeps the cuff links in her pocketbook, and they become a visual leitmotiv as she recurrently looks at them through the years. In the penultimate scene in 1962, she and that agent are reunited in a shabby room in an English seaside hotel. When she zonks out on marijuana, he goes, but not before he sees the cuff links in her open bag. (All that's missing is a "links" theme in the score.)

And there's a small but significant change in the final scene, the flashback to the end of the war that is in both play and film. In the film it's on a lovely French hillside overlooking a village where victory is about to be celebrated—Susan and a lovable old French farmer and his lovable old horse. There's some wistful conversation, then he invites her home to have some soup with his wife and himself. In the play, before that invitation, the farmer says he's not going down to join the celebration. "Myself, I work. A farmer. Like any other day. The Frenchman works or starves. He is the piss. The shit. The lowest of the low." Susan completely disregards him and ends with her joyous last line, "There will be days and days and days like this." The film, too, ends with that line, but the softening of the farmer's dialogue eliminates the play's clear signal at the (chronological) start of her story that the war has made little change in many people's lives and that she

is incapable of seeing it. The cuff links and the sweetened farmer are among the alterations that slacken tensions around and within Susan.

The Susan is Meryl Streep. I've been fervent about her since her drama school days, but I think her performance here—excepting *Still of the Night* (1982), which was just a blip on the screen for all concerned—is her least successful film work to date. This is a relative statement, relative to Streep's gifts, which easily embrace the emotional range of this role. But her voice sounds limited, uninflected, insufficiently interesting. Vocal richness has long been a problem for her, I think; and here she is surrounded by English actors brought up in a tradition where the voice is not just a means of making words audible but is the instrument with which acting begins. That tradition is not one of hammy scooping and gliding but of belief in the magic of the word itself and of the finest shades of inflection.

Streep has several big scenes to play with John Gielgud, the emperor of this tradition; one long scene with Ian McKellen, who is very adept in it; and a great deal to play with Charles Dance, who is decently competent in it. All of them, merely by using their techniques truthfully, make Streep sound vocally lackluster. Even Tracey Ullman, a young woman of limited experience, has, simply by virtue of an ear conditioned to England's English, more color than Streep. Unlike Streep's work with accents in *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *Silkwood* (1983) and *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1979), her work here makes her seem so concerned about merely sounding English that it absorbs much of her imaginative energy. (Her English role in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* [1981] was in a quite different vein—lush romance.)

Gielgud, as an arrogant but honorable ambassador, is a high-comedy delight. McKellen, in his one long scene as a lofty foreign-service official, embodies the dictum he pronounces: "Behavior is all." Dance, in the largest male role, is perfectly cast: he is winning enough to persuade us that Susan could feel fondly for him yet mild enough to let us understand that she might tire. As a cockney whom Susan selects to father a child in one of her attempts to replenish her life—an attempt that doesn't click biologically—Sting (Gordon Matthew Sumner) has aggressive sensitivity. Ullman, button-eyed and pert, is lively as Susan's chum, but her part is condensed to mute its counterpoint. In the original, this scattery young woman blunders her way up from bohemianism to give her life some purpose. This aspect of the play is present but dimmed in the film. Sam Neill, first widely visible in the Australian *My Brilliant Career* (1979), is adequately taciturn as the secret-agent lover.

Fred Schepisi, also Australian, who directed the haunting *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), has a touch of David Lean: he suggests intimacy in the large scenes and sizable power in the intimate ones. Richard MacDonald's sets are first-class. He uses fireplaces as totems of change in Susan's life. In her first postwar flat, there's a small gas heater; in a later home, there's a mod fireplace set above floor level in a plaster wall; later, in her married home, there's a huge ornate hearth and mantel. Ian Baker, Schepisi's constant colleague, is one of three or four Australian cinematographers who have lately established themselves as peers of the best. Every moment of *Plenty* looks lovely without being beautiful.

In that postscript to *Plenty*, Hare said: "It's a common criticism of my work that I write about women whom I find admirable, but whom the audience dislikes," and he explains that what he's aiming at is ambiguity. He wants the audience to make the decision. My complaint about *Wetherby* (1985), the

fascinating film he wrote *and* directed, was that I couldn't determine that he found his heroine admirable or anything else and that I didn't like or dislike her. What I felt was incompletion, not ambiguity. As for *Plenty*, in the original play there was never any doubt about liking Susan, by Hare or us, but the ambiguities of theme seemed to be more in Hare than in the work. The film discloses fewer ambiguities in him, more (questionable) clarity of purpose. Without actually traducing his ideas, he has somewhat smoothed out his fractious play for a star, according to the film world's needs.

Die Nacht (*The Night*), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1985 (*The New Republic*, 2 December 1985)

A true adventurer in film, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg presses on. After *Our Hitler* (1977) and *Parsifal* (1982), which teemed with images and characters and devices and fantasies, he now presents *Die Nacht*, which is mostly set in one place and, through all of its six hours, has only one performer. Yet this film is not a whit less adventurous than the earlier ones and, through different modes and stimuli, teems just as plentifully.

Die Nacht consists of a prologue and two sections, with an intermission after Part I. After the prologue, of a half hour or so, the credits appear, a number of authors are listed, some album pages turn, and then we move to Part I and the only setting used thereafter. Part II begins with a similar listing of authors, some album pages, and a return to that same setting. (The prologue is in pale colors, as shot by Xaver Schwarzenberger; the rest is in black and white.) From the authors whom he names, Syberberg has culled, touched up, and interwoven—with some autobiographical material—a skein of language intended to circumscribe the night of his title: the long night of Western culture.

That he includes more than Europe in this night is patent from the start. The prologue, spoken in a large, rubble-strewn room in a battered Berlin building, is the speech of the American Indian chief Seattle when he signed a peace treaty with Washington, D.C., in 1855. His words envision the end of his people and their ways, but Seattle warns the white man that, though the Indians may disappear from view, their spirits will continue to inhabit the land. Syberberg dabs this speech with present-day references that ensure topicality and ensure also that the words apply to Europe as well as the United States. The speaker is the great German actress Edith Clever, clad in a simple dress and holding a dark, rough cloth about herself. Only then do the credits come—after Clever finishes speaking.

We now move to a placeless place: a floor of gleaming black gravel, a white circle of light at its center and a small white cloth in the light, with a cloak of darkness surrounding everything. In the light, acutely varied by the cinematographer Schwarzenberger, Clever spends the next five-and-a-half hours—close to us or with the camera at differing distances and angles, her body statuesque or sinuous depending on the angle and the light, her torso curved away from the camera-eye into architectural form, her body self-caressed in recollections of Eros, her presence immediate, her presence godlike, as she speaks, intones, sings, mourns, and eulogizes through the medium of the text that Syberberg has prepared. As far as the film reveals, Clever, or Clever's character, is

the sole survivor of a long, glorious, *and* atrocious history, and before she too disappears into the black all around her, she offers a threnody.

The text, often accompanied by sections of Bach's *Das wohltemperierte Klavier* (*The Well-Tempered Clavier*) in Sviatoslav Richter's hands, moves through literature that is mostly German—Hölderlin, Goethe, Heine, and Nietzsche, as well as Schiller, Kleist, Novalis, and Heidegger—but with minglings of other cultures translated into German. (Prospero's farewell to his art, from *The Tempest* but in German, is transfixing.) The tone ranges from Wagner's crawling pleas for help from his patron Giacomo Meyerbeer, to his slimy spewings to King Ludwig II about "Jewry in Music"; from the sight of a child's toy in Clever's hand to her sublime reciting of a poem (by Novalis?) in which humankind asks Jesus if his father is still alive, to which the son of God, his eyes streaming with tears, replies that we are all orphans now.

Courage is one hallmark of Syberberg's film work, and that hallmark is visible in *Die Nacht*. He wants to burst through order and plunge into the unknown, the possibly chaotic, there to forge a new aesthetic order. Since he did this differently in his previous two films—*Our Hitler* and *Parsifal*—no fixed criteria will help the spectator to navigate Syberberg's artistic ventures. Sometimes, I must admit, *Die Nacht* escaped my powers of attention during my sole viewing of it. For the film doesn't aim at a relentless, concentrated march toward spiritual nakedness and existential nullity like *Acropolis*, the titanic theater production by Jerzy Grotowski from the mid-1960s, which conducted its own requiem. (*Acropolis* took the concentration camp at Auschwitz for its setting, and, for its "plot," the building by the prisoners there of the gas chamber in which they will be consumed.) *Die Nacht*, six times as long, does not march and only fitfully exalts.

Principally, the film *remembers*, but its memories wander in addition to both fondling the past and grieving over it. Certainly it has passages that repeat notes already heard. Certainly, too, it vibrates more fully for someone familiar with German literature in German. But even such a person would not find every moment in *Die Nacht* tense and fraught with meaning: I, for one, did not. Yet it is a facet of Syberberg's experimental daring—not an excuse for avant-garde idling—that, instead of shaping a drama, he has in effect enclosed a preserve or park, of time, in which to linger and remember and even nod in the last remaining light. One factor in this film, however, did sustain me through its length, and it was surely a part of Syberberg's design from the beginning. *Die Nacht* must have been conceived, that is, with the prospective collaboration of Edith Clever in the principal—and, it's worth repeating, the lone—role.

Clever is known in the United States chiefly through the films *Die linkshändige Frau* (*The Left-Handed Woman*, 1978; written and directed by Peter Handke) and *The Marquise of O.* (Éric Rohmer's version, 1976), and through Syberberg's *Parsifal*, where she mimed Kundry so intensely that, although it was not her singing voice we heard, it seemed to be. What is not known in North America is her theater career, mostly with the Schaubühne in the former West Berlin. I have never seen Clever on stage, but I know that she has played leading roles in works by Schiller (*Kabale und Liebe* [*Love and Intrigue*]), Goethe (*Torquato Tasso*), Middleton and Rowley (*The Changeling*), Ibsen (*Peer Gynt*), and Aeschylus (*The Oresteia*), as well as in plays by Gorky, Brecht, and Botho Strauss. In 1983 she played Gertrude in *Hamlet*.

I cite all of these instances prior to Clever's work in *Die Nacht* because they are quite clearly the sources of her spiritual or imaginative endowment (not to speak of her physical resources), of the simple majesty with which she makes her very first movement, utters her very first word in this, Syberberg's eighth film. I know of no better actress or actor in the world than Edith Clever, and few are her peers; but *Die Nacht* is not a display vehicle, a "one-woman show" where the woman herself, or generic "woman," is the focus. Clever is completely and wondrously in union with what is happening in the film. So much so that her art *in itself* is as much a manifestation of the culture that *Die Nacht* embraces and indicts, as much both an exhilarating triumph and a profound grief, as any of the words in the text.

Clever performed *Die Nacht* a few times in a small Paris theater in 1984, and, in conversation with Syberberg and Clever a few days after I saw the film, I asked if it had been planned as a theater piece, then filmed. No, Syberberg responded, *Die Nacht* had been planned as a film, but when this Paris theater offered to produce it (after its initial production some years before at the Schaubühne in Berlin), he accepted. The stage setting was much like that of the film, and French subtitles were projected high above, on the dark wall behind Clever. The production was done in two evenings—three-and-a-half hours, then two-and-a-half hours—each evening without intermission. "And," said Syberberg proudly, "although there was a prompter there, Edith never needed him, she never faltered." I replied that I supposed the stage darkened from time to time—if only to give Clever a momentary breather—in the way that the film goes to black and then resumes at a different angle or distance. "No," said Syberberg, "the pauses in the film of *Die Nacht* are there only because the film runs out in the camera-magazine."

That Paris engagement was Syberberg's first theater work, and it underscored that, volitionally or not, he was further exploring—on screen as on stage—what I once called, in reference to *Parsifal*, the "theater of film." Two passages in the film of *Die Nacht* especially mark this exploration: two Wagnerian excerpts, one from Isolde's "Liebestod," the other from Brünnhilde's "Immolation Scene" in *Götterdämmerung*. In both instances, we hear a full orchestra playing as Clever sings. She has nothing like an operatic voice; she merely sings pleasantly. (Syberberg did tell me, however, that a Wagnerian conductor he knew was struck by the accuracy of her entrances and tempi and phrasing.) The point is that, with her modest singing voice, Clever acts those excerpts in a manner that illuminates them as never before.

Wagner himself asked the impossible: wonderful singing *and* wonderful acting. A major Wagnerian production gives you the first, plus passable acting. Clever, who could not possibly do the first, supplies what is always missing from the second. As I watched her perform in the film of *Die Nacht*, I suddenly wanted to see a Wagnerian "theater of film" in which Clever would give us, in this manner, the missing dramatic element to add to our memory of musically great Isoldes, to name just one heroine—which is not the same (if you think about it) as her miming a character, however convincingly in the case of *Parsifal*'s Kundry, to the accompaniment of another woman's operatic voice.

All of the above is to emphasize that Syberberg is seeking new empowerment for the arts he inherited in the arts he practices: theater and film, or film and theater. What persists after the long filmic threnody of *Die Nacht*, as

after the enduring theatrical conceptualization of *Parsifal*, is that Syberberg's search, in tandem with Clever, is the expression of an austere hope (but nonetheless a valid one) not only for the rebirth of the culture he is mourning, but also for the consecration of a theater of film.

Why a *theater* of film? Because the filmmaker Syberberg paradoxically believes, as he said to me, that film represents "the birth of *dead* light and *dead* images, the birth of a plastic art on film that split the nucleus of the world into a series of views and angles, much as scientists split the atom, and thus disturbed the world in ways we all know." Only the human spirit can cohere in the face of such a disturbed world, ever veering toward environmental destruction and nuclear holocaust. And that spirit, that "grace of pure life," as Syberberg put it, can still be found—whole, shining, and undisturbed—in the living theater.

'night, Mother, Tom Moore, 1986 (*The New Republic*, 13 October 1986)

Marsha Norman has adapted her play *'night, Mother* for the screen and has helped it slightly in a negative way, by a small omission. But it remains an artificiality, a stunt, which (like Lanford Wilson's *Talley's Folly*) is so proud of its clever shape that in the end pallid cleverness is all it has to offer.

Jessie Cates, in her late thirties, lives with her widowed mother, Thelma, in a cutesy house somewhere in a rural but not backwoods region. At the beginning, Jessie tells Thelma that she is going to kill herself. Thelma tries to dissuade her. After an hour and a half of talk, Jessie runs into her bedroom, locks the door, and shoots herself. During that hour and a half, we learn that Jessie is divorced, has a teenaged drug-addict son, and is epileptic, though she has had no attacks for a year. The remission is, I assume, to assure us that Jessie is committing suicide for reasons other than physical ones; the illness itself is meant to link her with her father, who also was epileptic. Jessie is going to kill herself because "'I' never got here." She feels that if she lived another fifty years, she would be in the same empty condition. The author makes some attempt to bond Jessie and her dead father against her petulant old ninny of a mother, who never loved her husband. But since the author never shows that this alliance has anything to do with Jessie's decision, all the exploration and reminiscence degenerate into palaver to fill out the time frame.

Jessie is not neurotic, not desperate. She is much more organized and self-possessed than her mother. Her decision to kill herself is supposed to come from a dispassionate, philosophical view. Why does she announce the decision to her mother? She says she wants to spare Thelma the pain of discovery, but in effect she gives Thelma ninety extra minutes of pain. Why doesn't the silly, childish Thelma become hysterical instead of trying to be persuasive and appealing? Because that would spoil the author's design.

I quote from my review of the play:

> If the play were true—to Norman's characters as she wants us to think of them—it wouldn't exist. Either Jessie would shoot herself before it begins or as soon as she discloses her plans, Thelma would collapse. . . . Thelma's one impeccable line comes right after the shot. Against the locked bedroom door she sobs: "Forgive me. I thought you were mine." The drama that

> really leads to that line—of a clawing Electra complex, of the mother's mirror-image hatreds, and of pity overarching both—has not been written.

Norman has omitted that last line from the screenplay. Thus at least she avoids suggesting the play/film that this might have been.

The screenplay "opens up" the play conventionally: we see rooms other than the play's one room, we see other members of the family outside. Still it remains a two-character piece. Such a piece needs two virtuosos, and this film doesn't have them. Anne Bancroft, the Thelma, is a vulgar actress. Almost every choice she makes, from her first mugging outside the window, seems to have been decided before a mirror by a woman of defective taste. Her defects are underscored here because she apparently has no picture of the woman as a whole: she merely moves from point to point, maneuvering to score with each one. Sissy Spacek, the Jessie, is much better. To the best of her ability, she tries to realize a character out of the adduced characteristics that Norman provides. But Spacek doesn't have *enough* ability. She does nothing false; she is just insufficiently interesting.

Tom Moore, director of the first theater production, also directed the film. He overdoes reaction shots: too often he insists on showing us the listener's face, while the other one is talking, although we know very well what the reaction is. Moore also seems to be walking a tightrope: if he shoots one scene over Bancroft's shoulder, focusing on Spacek for a time, he very soon does the reverse. As for his work with the two women, I'd assume that it was difficult to help Bancroft but that Spacek responded.

***Swimming to Cambodia*, Jonathan Demme, 1987 (*The New Repu*blic, 23 March 1987)**

It's always gratifying to see someone accomplish the impossible. Everyone knows that a good film cannot be made of a one-performer theater piece—everyone, that is, who hasn't seen Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's masterly six-hour work *Die Nacht* (*The Night*, 1985), with Edith Clever. Now here is another one-performer filmed theater piece, not comparable to *Die Nacht* in length or any other way except that it, too, accomplished the impossible. *Swimming to Cambodia* is funny, pungent, obliquely grave, and its interest never flags.

The author-performer is Spalding Gray, who has been active for twenty years in the Off-Off Broadway theater. He was one of the founders of the Wooster Group, which did a number of his pieces at the Performing Garage, the place where he first did *Swimming to Cambodia* and where the film was made. (I saw the piece last year when it moved up to Lincoln Center.) It could hardly be simpler. Gray, a pleasant-looking man in his early forties, comes out onto a relatively bare stage, furnished only with a table and chair, a glass of water, and two stands from which he later pulls down maps. For the film, a blue-sky-and-clouds backdrop has been added. Gray wears an open sport short and chinos, and he carries a notebook, to which he occasionally refers or pretends to refer. Seated at the table, he tells us an autobiographical story. In the theater there was an intermission, and the whole ran just under two hours. For the film it has been condensed to eighty-seven

minutes with, of course, no intermission.

Jonathan Demme, who has been laureled by some for *Something Wild* (1986) and other films, directed. For me, this is his best work, reticent yet sage. Demme hasn't tried to compensate drastically for the "handicap" of a one-man show: he seems to relish the cinematic difficulty and just lets us enjoy the fact that, in the main, Gray's writing and performance are making this film. Demme moves in and out and often changes angles; he alters the lighting to underscore transitions: but none of this, except for one sudden close-up near the end, distracts. He has done only enough to make sure that our traditional filmic conditioning doesn't interfere with our enjoyment of Gray.

In 1983, Gray tells us, he was engaged for a small part in *The Killing Fields* (1984), Roland Joffé's film about Sydney Schanberg's life during the end of the Vietnam War and after. Gray played a miniscule role as an aide to the American ambassador in Saigon. (A few clips are inserted.) Gray recounts his experiences during the filming, which was done in Thailand: the lush movie-company living, the general extravagance. He says that one small bit of his had to be shot sixty-six times, then had to be dubbed later in New York because of cricket noises on the soundtrack. But this account, amusing as it is, is only the main stem of the piece. Out of its branches grows much else: about his life in New York, his companions in the film company, his reaction to the beauty of Southeast Asia, especially the beaches. Yet, in his dry, maturely wide-eyed way, Gray also tells us tangentially how his involvement in this film made the starkness of the Vietnam War, especially the secret bombing of Cambodia, indelibly real to him. He comes on as an informal, somewhat garrulous and taking SoHo character who got involved in the making of a major picture; but behind that involvement, his adventures with his friends, his samplings of Thai pot, and his enjoyment of a free ride, shadows lurk.

I can't quite say that Gray's monologue did more to re-create the ghastliness of those last Saigon days than did *The Killing Fields*. But I wasn't a great admirer of Joffé's film, and I was more ironically moved by what seeps through this account from a man who lucked into a luxurious stay in a horribly haunted part of the world.

***Driving Miss Daisy*, Bruce Beresford, 1989 (*The New Republic*, 22 January 1990)**

Jessica Tandy and Morgan Freeman are first-rate in *Driving Miss Daisy*. It would be surprising if they weren't. Two such exceptional actors could not miss the opportunities in Alfred Uhry's screenplay, which, like his play on which it's based, was constructed as a sure thing. This is not to say that any other two actors would have been as good as Tandy and Freeman, only that any two good actors could climb aboard this tidy little vehicle and ride off to huzzahs and talk of Academy Awards. That's what Uhry's piece exists *for*.

Tandy plays an aging, well-to-do Atlanta widow, Jewish, who is getting too old to drive. Freeman is the somewhat younger—though not young—black man engaged by Tandy's married son, Dan Aykroyd, to be his mother's chauffeur. Tandy, proud and independent, resents the arrival of Freeman, patient and wise, who understands both her resentment and her need of his help. The whole film

then lies plain before us. Her resentment is going to fade, and through the years they are going to become friends.

I've read somewhere that Uhry drew his play from his family's history, so I don't suppose that he set out consciously to provide another item in the genre that includes the musical comedy *The Zulu and the Zayda* and the film *A Majority of One* (1961)—a genre in which a Jewish person and a very different kind of person, initially distant, grow close and prove that all the peoples of the world could get on together if only we'd get in there and try. But *Driving Miss Daisy* ends up just one more of that soppy breed.

As in any pop genre when well executed, *Daisy* has its melty moments. ("Extraordinary how potent cheap music is," says the heroine of Coward's *Private Lives*.) But the whole piece exists to stroke the audience reassuringly. The old woman asserts often that she has no prejudice, though she has no black friends. Freeman's granddaughter, at the end of the years traveled through, is a high school biology teacher, though Aykroyd is insufficiently concerned even to know of this. *Driving Miss Daisy* tells us that if we just keep on as we're going, allowing carefully stratified friendships to blossom here and there, everything is going to be O.K. If Stanley Kramer were still active in film production, he would have rushed to buy the screen rights of Uhry's play.

In the theater the piece had only three characters: all the others were suggested. Suggested, too, were the settings and the successive cars that Miss Daisy acquires through the years and that her chauffeur drives. This Thornton Wilder approach lent the play a veneer of imagination. The screenplay is of course "opened up," with the other characters present, with the places and the cars real. Thus the veneer is stripped away, and the piece is all the more clearly revealed as a cozy tearjerker. This is emphasized by Peter James's cinematography, which lays on a golden haze that might give Hallmark itself some pause.

But Tandy and Freeman are fine. Primarily they are tasteful. They understood what plums they had been handed, and instead of cutting loose, they worked with truth and care. Freeman gives an extended, but not inflated, version of his theater performance in this role, with all the dignity allowed a man in his circumscribed position, with humor and sagacity, and with as valid a depiction of advancing age, free of actor's hokum, as I can remember. To see this film right after seeing Freeman's ex-slave Union soldier in *Glory* (1989) is to be reassured about the survival of imaginative acting in our beleaguered film and theater worlds.

Tandy has a sense of proportion. All of Miss Daisy's attributes—defensive pride, restrained gratitude, tempered dislike of her daughter-in-law, loyalty to her standards—are made part of a woman, not facets of a virtuoso performance. Toward the end Miss Daisy has an attack of senile dementia that is especially moving because Tandy has given us such a lustrous portrait of the disciplined woman who is now wandering. This scene, like all of what she does here, reminds us that we are enjoying the fruit of a long, lovely career. (Tandy was Cordelia to John Gielgud's Lear in the 1940 theater production directed by Harley Granville-Barker. This, by the way, was thirteen years after her début!)

Jessica Tandy and Morgan Freeman thus do what prime actors have very often done: they make the piece they are in seem better than it is.

***The Madness of King George*, Nicholas Hytner, 1994 (*The New Republic*, 30**

January 1995)

Scarlet begins it. British officers swirl into an ante-chamber of Windsor in 1788, their scarlet uniforms declarative of pomp and glory, the dresses of the ladies around them glittering in complement. Thus Nicholas Hytner opens *The Madness of King George*, establishing the visual drama of court life as an element, not mere background, in the political and personal conflicts shortly to follow.

The film is adapted by Alan Bennett from his play *The Madness of George III*. (The title was altered slightly so that we movie mutts won't think this is the second sequel to a first film about George.) Hytner directed the play's premiere for the (London) National Theatre, and this production was brought to New York. For those who, like myself, were disappointed in the play, the film contains pleasant surprises, all of them resulting from differences between the two arts.

The story starts just before the onset of King George's first bout of madness, then follows his treatment by several physicians, his recovery, and his resumption of power. Wound into this account, itself harrowing and pathetic by turns, are all the strands dependent on the king's condition. Political balance varies from day to day according to the color of the royal urine, which is supposedly an index to his recovery. The opposing leaders in the House of Commons, William Pitt the Younger and Charles James Fox, jockey to keep or get control, and they vie to maneuver the Prince of Wales, whose hopes rise and fall as his father's health falls and rises. (Some digs about royal-family behavior have present-day sting.)

All of the above, as material for drama, may sound remote and moldy to modern viewers. Shakespeare can grip us with stories of English kings, but even he had occasional troubles. (Take another look at *King John*.) Lesser dramatists, which all other dramatists are, have crammed theaters and libraries with plays about royal hugger-mugger that are torpid. There are usually two troubles with them. Only a really vitalizing art can make us empathize today with royal lives; and history isn't artistic—it insists on *longueurs*, and it doesn't always provide climaxes.

On the first score, Bennett's play does better than most. The fear and fascination of madness link kings and commoners. And Bennett's dialogue can glisten. He writes in chewy morsels that render period speech with a modern edge. Says the Prince of Wales: "To be heir to the throne is not a position; it is a predicament." Or the king to a doctor who had previously been a clergyman:

> KING: You have quitted a profession I have always loved, and embraced one I heartily detest.
> WILLIS: Our Saviour went about healing the sick.
> KING: Yes, but he had not 700 pounds a year for it.

Bennett can also be nicely wry. In one episode Dr. Francis Willis orders the king to read aloud, as therapy presumably, a scene from Shakespeare, and they light on the recognition scene from *King Lear*, in which the mad Lear recovers. (Bennett would have gotten more from this episode if he had told us that this was possibly the last time these words were spoken in George's lifetime. When his madness subsequently returned, Shakespeare's text was banned from the stage; only a prettified version was performed until George's death in 1820.)

But on the second score, even Bennett's clever style on stage didn't triumph

over an integral burden of fact. Madness was not a play but a chronicle. There was no climax. Some things happened; then they stopped happening. Bennett tried to compensate by inserting, just before the finish, a flash-forward, which told us that the madness was going to recur and that our century would discover that the trouble was physiological, not psychological. But the flash-forward didn't make us forget that we had spent a long evening only to return to the situation where it all started.

Thus the play. Bennett's film adaptation omits the last-minute warning of more trouble ahead—along with other trimming—yet it's much stronger than the play. True, the film audience will now believe at the end that the king was permanently cured; so, in script terms, the film is even more of a chronicle than the play. Yet, paradoxically, it is more gripping than the play. The simple explanation: it is a film.

As film, *The Madness of King George* is strong proof that the immediacy of the human countenance, the almost palpable verities of costume and place, the ranges of vista, the enforcements of rhythm—all of them film prerogatives—can fuse and create genuine dramatic sustenance. It happened, for example, in Rossellini's *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (1966), and it happens again here.

I suggest no superiority of film art over theater art: I'm describing a difference. (To note one contrary instance of the theater's power: no film, however great, has done for me precisely what Ariane Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides* did.) A central beauty of the theater is that it can suggest physicalities, though it often fulfills them; a central beauty of film is that it can fulfill physicalities, though it often suggests them. In the case of *The Madness of King George*, helped marvelously by the deployment of Handel on the soundtrack, film fulfills.

Nigel Hawthorne, who was George in the National Theatre production, plays him again here. He was scintillating on stage, and he's even better here—because it's film. Skilled and vivid though his theater performance was, it impressed most in its marathon effect: Hawthorne did the whole long demanding role right there before us in one evening. On film, obviously, that effect disappears, and his acting supervenes. Here it scintillates even more brightly: shrewd, vain, pathetic, regal. And film brings us a Hawthorne quality that escaped me in the theater: his resemblance, in face and voice and speech and flavor, to Ralph Richardson. Wonderful. Film can certainly use such an actor. Is it too late for Hawthorne to have Richardson's latter-day career?

Most helpful among the others are Julian Wadham as Pitt, Jim Carter as Fox, Rupert Everett as the Prince (though he's not as fat as his father keeps complaining), and John Wood as the cobra Edward Thurlow. Ian Holm is not his most incisive self as Dr. Willis. Helen Mirren, who plays Queen Charlotte, doesn't convince as the mother of fifteen children, nor does she consistently sound German, which Charlotte was. The costume designer, Mark Thompson, has seen the entire company ingeniously, as figures out of Johan Zoffany and Thomas Rowlandson and (no ancestor, alas) Angelica Kauffmann. Andrew Dunn, the impressive cinematographer, serves both the director and the designer with perceptible relish.

A comparative study, international, immense, could be done of directors who have worked in both theater and film. Some broad categories are apparent. First, directors whose style is essentially unchanged in both arts—Elia Kazan and Mike Nichols, for instance. Second, those whose theater and film works are

markedly different. A towering instance is Ingmar Bergman: to judge by the three theater pieces of his that I've seen, his films allow him to shed gimmicks and concentrate on intensity. Hytner, much lower in the scale, is also in this second group, a director whose film work is distinct from his theater approach.

I've seen two of Hytner's theater productions, *The Madness of George III* and *Carousel*, and thought that, contradictorily, *Carousel* had less musical-comedy fluency than *Madness*. But the film of *Madness* displays new resources in Hytner—freedoms offered and exploited, motion understood as something other than action and speed, a comprehension of texture itself as a form of dynamics. In *Hamlet* Claudius says, "Madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go." Hytner, Bennett, Hawthorne, and their colleagues ensure that George will be watched.

Richard III, Richard Loncraine, 1995 (*The New Republic*, 12 February 1996)

Some works in the performing arts are interesting only if done by virtuoso performers. I wouldn't want to hear the Sibelius violin concerto again except with an absolutely dazzling soloist. The film of *Richard III* reminds us that this play is in the same dubious state. If we penetrate the incense that surrounds the very name of the author, the play stands revealed as one of his least rewarding: in character development, moral profundity, and quality of verse. ("I had an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him; / I had a husband, till a Richard kill'd him." Etc., etc.) Only a lot of dazzle in the leading role can sustain our attention to the incessant murders and the litanies about them.

Ian McKellen is not the man for the job. Yes, he has long experience in Shakespeare. Yes, this film derives from a theater production that was successful in London and New York. Yes, McKellen is intelligent, skilled, and muscularly forceful. What he doesn't have is brilliance; and without that, both the title character and the drama sink into Victor Hugo.

Cutting the play severely, as this screen adaptation does, doesn't reduce the burden. It only makes the play less tolerable because there is less breathing space between the killings, less regard for motive and reaction. Transposing the play to the twentieth century—in this case the 1930s—only raises the question: Why? When Orson Welles did *Julius Caesar* à la Mussolini in 1937, an argument for topicality was advanced (not without strain even then). But *Richard III* in the 1930s? Now? Are we to believe that this power-greedy homicidal malcontent was a fascist? Nonsense. He had nothing in his head except schemes for personal advancement. The apposition is facile—and reductive of the dangers of fascism.

Richard Loncraine, the director, and his colleagues have labored to make the film fast and electric; but they, like McKellen with his cigarettes and pop records, only seem to be sweating with worry. "Shakespeare isn't old-fashioned and boring!" they insist and insist, thus getting in the way of whatever impact this sanguinary parade might possibly have.

Only one scene in the play has a kernel of intrinsic interest for me, the wooing of Lady Anne, in which Richard interrupts the funeral procession of her father-in-law—whom he killed after he killed her husband—to court Anne and propose marriage. In the film the scene is played in a morgue, over the corpse (a very different theatrical matter from a coffin), and the text is more severely sliced than the corpse.

Lady Anne is Kristin Scott Thomas, sufficiently la-de-dah. Some others do well enough with the scraps of their parts that remain: Annette Bening as Queen Elizabeth, Nigel Hawthorne as Clarence, Maggie Smith as the Duchess of York. There's a special poignancy in the case of John Wood as King Edward. He's too old for it now, but what I've seen of Wood on stage in Molière and Stoppard and Schnitzler persuades me that he must have been a scintillating Richard III when he played it in London some years back.

The most famous line in the play, certainly, comes in the battle of Bosworth Field: "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" How does this motorized film deal with it? By putting Richard in an army vehicle that gets stuck at a crucial moment.

Othello, Oliver Parker, 1995 (*The New Republic*, 12 February 1996)

I know of no drama in the whole history of the art, including the Greeks, that surpasses *Othello* in the sense of a force launched at the start that drives unremittingly to the end, gathering speed and power as it goes.

The basic trouble with the film of *Othello* is that, for what it takes to be cinematic reasons, it breaks up this direct course into fragments. Further, the adaptation by Oliver Parker, who also directed, shuns complete scenes, complete at least in shape even if condensed. So what we get is an assemblage, a mosaic, instead of unbroken onrush.

Throughout, Parker scrabbles for "cinematizing" as constantly as Orson Welles did in his *Othello* film (1952), though not as effectively. (Welles had lately seen Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* [Part I, 1944] and patently used it as a filmic model.) This leads to oddities. For instance, the scene in which Iago swears to help Othello in his quest for revenge is put by Parker in the water—on the beach at the ocean's edge. Yet when he gets the chance really to utilize film's power—to cut away, for instance—he muffs it. The last scene of the play is a directorial headache in the theater. What to do with Othello while he waits for Desdemona to pray? What to do with Emilia's body after she insists on lying down to die next to her dead mistress? How to get Emilia out of the way so that, after Othello stabs himself, he can kiss his wife goodbye without a third person on hand? Parker uses none of the devices of editing to help him with these matters.

Besides the rearrangements of the text, a great deal is cut. To what is left of his role, Laurence Fishburne gives a committed try. He does well enough in dignity and manly love until the speech that ends "Othello's occupation's gone!", which lacks size. His performance never regains sufficient stature. Whether or not the picture was shot in sequence, it's easy to mark this as the place where Fishburne begins to dwindle. (I must note, too, that he is not helped much by his costumes. When he arrives at Cyprus, he seems to be wearing what look like leathern Bermuda shorts.)

What was the casting principle of this film—in terms of accents? Fishburne speaks good American English. Gabriele Ferzetti (of *L'Avventura*, long ago in 1960) wrestles with English as the Duke. As for Desdemona, even if we concede that Irène Jacob is much too old for the role and concede, too, that she is insufficiently winning, why a markedly French woman?

Kenneth Branagh's speech doesn't quite fit with the others, but he makes it

seem their hard luck. Branagh's Iago isn't near Christopher Plummer's magnificent performance on the stage in 1982; still, he savors neatly what text and space are granted him. The "put money in thy purse" speech to Roderigo is a gem, delicately modeled without actorish maneuvering.

The composer, Charles Mole, had the horrible task of writing a score that, for many of us, would compete with Verdi. Mole comes off honorably, with music of lyric gravity.

Classics Ahead! A recent issue of *Variety* lists twenty-four British films in production. A full third of them are adaptations of famous works—two from Shakespeare, two from Hardy, one from James, one from Austen, one from Conrad and one from Kenneth Grahame (*The Wind in the Willows*). All aboard for Parnassus . . . let's hope.

***American Buffalo*, Michael Corrente, 1996 (*The New Republic*, 16-23 September 1996)**

Obviously the one-set play with very few characters is not suitable for filming—except that, like so many obvious wisdoms, it's untrue. Precepts bend to talent. *Stevie* (1978) and *The Caretaker* (1963) and *My Dinner with André* (1981), all made from small-scale theater works, are valuable films. *American Buffalo* is another.

David Mamet made the screen adaptation of his play and has done only a little physical "opening up": most of the film takes place where the play does, in Don's Resale Shop, a junk shop crammed with all kinds of odds and ends. One of the play's fascinations is that it seems to put that shop under a microscope. A minuscule speck of the world is hugely enlarged, like the eye of a fly in magnifying photography; so, paradoxically, the shop becomes massive in veristic detail at the same time that it becomes an abstraction. In the film the paradox is heightened with a simple device. The streets outside are always empty, whether we glimpse them through the windows or occasionally go out there. Once in a long while, a car drives by. Not one other person is seen, other than a few partially glimpsed faces in a poker game right at the start. Thus this intensely realistic shop is simultaneously anywhere and nowhere.

It's in a dingy part of whatever city it is. Opposite Don's is a vacant movie theater, for rent. Diagonally across the way is the coffee shop that figures in the dialogue, but the doorway is not exactly busy. Sometimes it rains, heavily, and, as heavy rain will do, this increases the sense of enclosure.

Mamet's language in itself underscores the paradox of verism-cum-abstraction. The general texture is naturalistic, nearly stenographic—the broken sentences, the repetitions, the litanies of everyday; then, suddenly, with a word or a phrase, the vernacular lifts into an arch. "This is admirable." "You know, this is real classical money we're talking about." "The shot is yours, no one's disputing that." "The path of some crazed lunatic sees you as an invasion of his personal domain." With a lesser writer, such lines might seem fissures in verism; but Mamet so thoroughly certifies the accuracy of his ear that we feel we are flying past the character's actual powers of expression into the thoughts in him that he isn't always able to express. Like the physical context, the real is lifted into the abstract.

Two men are the center of the piece: Don, who owns the shop, and Teach,

of no known occupation except burglaries now and then. They gab and fret and discuss and pass the time until, almost obliquely, a plan for a burglary is broached by Don. There's a third character, a young gofer called Bob, a sort of apprentice to Don, who is also involved in the burglary plan. The title refers to an American buffalo nickel that a customer bought in Don's shop a week or so earlier.

Don suspects, though he's not sure, that the coin is worth more than he got for it and that the customer has other rarities. Don decides to rob the customer's house, and it's around this scheme that the play simmers and boils. The scheme is inchoate—very loose indeed if these are experienced burglars—but the play's emphasis is not on the burglary itself, it's on the dialogue around it, the verbal volleyball that the two principals keep playing. In Beckett's *Endgame*, Clov asks, "What is there to keep me here?" Hamm replies, "The dialogue." Beckett's pair are inside an empty sphere scraping its top; Mamet's pair are also inside, scraping the bottom. Both pairs live and breathe through interchange.

American Buffalo is full of opportunities for the eager symbolic interpreter. The junk shop as the detritus of an errant, wasteful society; Teach (which is only his nickname) as an instructor who can't instruct; and (bingo!) the quest for the coin whose true value isn't known, plus the fumbling of that quest—all this is fodder for symbolists. For me, however, the play is a species of incantation, profane and desperate, by vacuous men trying to create through their "dialogue" some sense of being, some environment for that being.

The producer of this film was Gregory Mosher, long experienced in the theater, who directed the world premiere of *American Buffalo* in Chicago in 1975. The director was Michael Corrente, who has written and directed one previous film, *Federal Hill* (1994), unseen by me. Corrente was trained for the theater and has worked there, including a production of *American Buffalo*. Presumably aided by Mosher and certainly aided by the editor, Kate Sanford, he keeps the film moving without jostling it. Corrente never seems worried about the one-room venue, and his freedom is even clearer in those few scenes where we go outside—they never seem frantic attempts to escape four walls. The film just takes place, naturally and energetically, where it takes place.

About the performances themselves, some question. Dustin Hoffman is Teach, long-haired and scruffy, loping around like a man who has nowhere to go and is, from moment to moment, inventing a dynamic for his life. Hoffman was implicitly up against tough competition in this part. Some of us have seen Robert Duvall and Al Pacino as Teach, and each was, in his own temper, superb. Hoffman, ultimately, is not. He has all the technique, the vigor of address, the experienced actor's ravening of actor's chances, but sometimes these attributes become apparent. A gesture is too clearly enjoyed, an intonation slips upward from this mucky world; and we become aware of Hoffman, the star, slumming. Remembering his Ratso Rizzo in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) twenty-seven years ago, in some measure an antecedent of Teach, I hoped to see Ratso much more full and complex. But in those twenty-seven years Hoffman has become so stellar that he can't keep every wisp of his success out of this performance.

Don is played by Dennis Franz, known for his running role on television in "NYPD Blue." Here his performance exemplifies the freeze that TV acting can inflict. I've seen that show a few times and have seen how Franz presents his bulky presence, his taciturnity, his knowingness week after week in episodes that are in part tailored to keep him turning out the Franz product. He keeps doing it here.

Franz certainly has some substance but only to the degree that his predetermined persona allows. He renders the same brusque authority, and, as on TV, his expression scarcely alters throughout the picture. "This is what you bought," he seems to say, "and this is what you'll get."

Bob is done by a teenaged black actor, Sean Nelson. He is completely competent, but Nelson adds another element to the mix. Bob has usually been played by someone in his early twenties. The use of Nelson in the part puts Don and Teach in the position of contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

Two further notes. When, toward the end, Teach trashes the shop, it's done much more violently than I've ever seen. This takes Don's passivity past the credible. And Thomas Newman's music is incomprehensibly harsh at the start and finish.

At any rate, *American Buffalo* is now available on film, in a lucid version. Whatever that version's flaws, Mamet's incantation works again.

***Twelfth Night*, Trevor Nunn, 1996 (*The New Republic*, 2 December 1996)**

Twelfth Night was directed by Trevor Nunn, an experienced theater hand, and is, in a way, a fair sample of this century's theater productions of Shakespeare. The guiding principle here is: transpose the play, in time or place or both, to a time or place about which it was not written. The original purpose was to heighten the play's topicality or to refresh the audience's experience of the play, but in recent decades this motive has been somewhat smothered by another. The director doesn't want to seem hidebound by tradition, so he has to do something to the play. Nunn's *Twelfth Night* is still set in Illyria, the mythical country of the original, but the time is moved ahead to the mid-nineteenth century. (When Sebastian arrives in this strange country and goes to see the sights, he carries a copy of Baedeker's *Illyria*.)

This alteration by Nunn might be called minimal. Other directors have done much more to *Twelfth Night*, particularly in the sexual vein, because Viola spends most of her time in male dress and calls herself Cesario. A woman (Olivia) is smitten with her, and a man (Orsino) is strongly attracted to Cesario though the latter is "male." Add the fact that in Shakespeare's time all women's roles were played by boys, and the sexual stew really simmers. Nunn hints only slightly at this theme and restricts himself to the temporal move. But why the mid-nineteenth century? Why not the mid-eighteenth? Or mid-twenty-first?

However, having settled for minimal change, Nunn then proceeds to muck up his production. The cutting and the rearrangements of the text are not much more severe than one is braced for, but he misconstrues the play's temper jarringly. Visually the film is seen mostly in a dreary gray climate—this play that seems entirely scented with flowers. Nunn cast Sir Toby Belch with a grossly unfunny actor, Mel Smith, who suggests nothing of the minor Falstaff in his part. That otherwise excellent actor Richard E. Grant plays Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who is to Toby as Roderigo is to Iago, as if Sir Andrew were on his way to becoming Hamlet. Maria, the maid who is a sort of cousin of Doll Tearsheet, is done by Imelda Staunton without an iota of merriment.

Imogen Stubbs, as Viola, one of the most romantic roles ever written, has all the warmth and color of a Popsicle. Orsino, the count whom she/he serves, is

played in a muffled manner by Toby Stephens, with no poetic line. A few people in the cast suggest what they might have done with their roles in a full-bodied production. Helena Bonham Carter, as the Countess Olivia, who falls in love with the disguised Viola, moves feelingly from mourning for her dead brother to longing for the youth. Nigel Hawthorne is a perfect Malvolio, Olivia's steward, or would be if he had not been urged by Nunn to distend his pomposities. And Ben Kingsley makes Olivia's jester, Feste, a shrewd philosopher with dignity under the motley.

A shipwreck, twins mistaken for each other, a woman posing as a man, a wise fool—all elements that Shakespeare used elsewhere—were woven by him into a lyric entity with language that is almost beyond belief. But Nunn, though modest in his alterations, has bungled the gist of the enterprise.

***Romeo + Juliet*, Baz Luhrmann, 1996 (*The New Republic*, 2 December 1996)**

The Australian director Baz Luhrmann takes the following view of Shakespeare: he regards the mere transposition of a play in time or place as nice-nellie daring. In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, he explodes the play itself; and his explosion begins with his title. *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* is both a joke and a manifesto that are clear a few seconds after the film begins. The first thing we see is a TV set. A newscaster speaks the opening chorus. Then the screen erupts.

The term "music video" covers it. One visual cascade after another, one sound blast—mostly of rock—after another. The setting is South Florida, Verona Beach, the time today. Possibly tomorrow. The Montagues and Capulets, except for the parents, are cool cats. A racially mixed lot, they drive large convertibles and carry large pistols. (A slight disjuncture here when they talk of swords and wave pistols; but by that time, who cares?) There's a very heavy load of Catholicism: the Madonna, the crucifix, church interiors with rows and rows of candles. The Catholicism is not used in contrast with the lust and killing but as part of the texture: the lovers-haters-killers are Catholics, that's all. Of course the church is in Shakespeare, too, but the play takes place in an entirely Catholic world. Here Luhrmann has made a choice of emphasis.

His first film was the garish *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), and of course he has directed music videos, too. His designer, Catherine Martin, who has worked with him before, here gives him bloated settings—ugly ones and overly pretty ones—by the basketful. The film devours them ravenously, burps noisily, and whirls along pyrotechnically.

Amid all this splattering a few fragments of the original text remain, addressed in 1990s-style. A few members of the cast—Pete Postlethwaite as Friar Laurence, Miriam Margolyes as Juliet's nurse, John Leguizamo as Tybalt—remind us of what their roles really are. Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Juliet (Claire Danes) ought not to be better than they are or they would seem out of place. (Much of the balcony scene takes place in a swimming pool in the Capulets' garden.)

Trevor Nunn's film of *Twelfth Night*, made in the same year, seems to say of Luhrmann's that it is excessive, that one can modernize Shakespeare with restraint. Luhrmann seems to be making a rude noise in response, implying that Nunn wants to swim with one foot on shore. For myself, I've never seen the need

to modernize plays that don't seem out of date; but of the two approaches in these films I confess I prefer Luhrmann's. Nunn's fiddling seems mere temporal décor. Luhrmann is in effect doing a translation, almost as if he had rendered the text into Finnish or Bulgarian, with a few English wisps remaining as souvenirs of the origin.

Why did Luhrmann have to fiddle with the greatest young-love story in the language? Presumably he would reply that there was no point in fiddling with anything smaller. If you want pristine *Romeo and Juliet*, he says, it's still there, it will always be there. If you want to see and hear this play soaked in a 1990s sensibility, here's the film. The result is horrifying, but it's also unsettling in its ruthlessness.

Oddly, both Nunn's *Twelfth Night* and Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* do something I've often noted about the screen versions of other, much lesser plays. The film medium is like an X-ray that enlarges flaws in plays. In *Twelfth Night* the end of the Malvolio story is always troublesome. The arrogant steward is tricked into making a fool of himself, but the result of the trickery is nasty. His story has to be finished, and Shakespeare has to interrupt the happy ending to finish it. This rift in the concluding pleasantness is even more rude on film.

In *Romeo and Juliet* the flaw in the tragic structure is the gimmick of the poison. Friar Laurence gives Juliet a drug that will make her seem dead and keep her that way until Romeo arrives in the tomb. Romeo arrives a bit too soon, thinks she is really dead, and takes poison. She awakes to find him dead. This accident, with tragedy hanging on a few minutes one way or another, is a long way from the tragic wholeness of, say, *Macbeth* or *King Lear*—a governing wholeness, despite their plot devices. Luhrmann, very cleverly, capitalizes on the gimmickry of the gimmick. Romeo thinks Juliet is dead and drinks the poison, but before he actually dies, she awakes and sees him dying. And he sees that she's alive. (After he expires, she finishes herself with his pistol.) This added twist underscores the patness of the original.

***The Crucible*, Nicholas Hytner, 1996 (*The New Republic*, 16 December 1996)**

"At a moment when we are all being 'investigated,' or imagining that we shall be, it is vastly disturbing to see indignant images of investigation on the other side of the footlights." So wrote Eric Bentley in 1953, reviewing Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* in *The New Republic*. Bentley's widely discussed review then commented on the play's implied parallel between the communist witch-hunt in the early 1950s and the witch-hunt in Salem in 1692:

> [The parallel] is true in that people today are being persecuted on quite chimerical grounds. It is untrue in that communism is not, to put it mildly, merely a chimera.

This criticism is still haunting Miller. In a recent *New Yorker* article about the writing of *The Crucible*, a moving article generally, he refers to this point (without mentioning Bentley) and replies that the existence of witches, in the seventeenth century, "was never questioned by the loftiest minds in Europe and America." But this is no reply: neither Bentley nor anyone else had questioned that witchcraft

was taken seriously in 1692. The real objection was that McCarthyism, as Miller certifies in his article, was what spurred him to write his play and that the analogy with the Salem witch-hunt was specious.

Paradoxically, this forty-year-old argument is all the more interesting today because, at this moment, it is irrelevant. Presented now as a film, *The Crucible* is actually helped by the fact that no topical analogy applies. (Diabolist circles today don't signify politically.) With no need to weather the political-analogy test, freed too of the gratitude of an audience hungry for anti-McCarthyism, the play stands on its own and is better for it.

John Proctor is a farmer in the Massachusetts colony; he and his wife, Elizabeth, have two sons. (Reduced, for some reason, from the three sons in the play.) Some months before the start, Elizabeth had discharged their maid, Abigail Williams, because she thought—justly—that something sexual was brewing between her husband and the maid. Now Abigail, living with her clergyman uncle, dances at night in the woods with other girls her age, eighteen or so, more to vent sexual steam than anything else. They are discovered by her uncle, who is enraged.

This turmoil leads to brief hysterical paralysis in two of the girls, and this in turn leads to charges that they have been bewitched. Accusations of witchcraft increase. After a chain of connections, Abigail sees a way, through more accusations of witchcraft, to get rid of Elizabeth so that she can have John. She doesn't see that John, too, will be involved.

A cloudburst of panic breaks over the village. (Abigail's uncle presses witchcraft charges against some men because he wants to acquire their land.) A prominent judge is brought in, and trials are held, all of them recorded. Eventually nineteen people are hanged as witches, including Proctor. He is given a chance to clear himself by signing a confession—to acts he did not commit. He signs; then, like Joan of Arc, he tears up his confession and chooses death. (Abigail had arranged for him to escape with her; he refused, and she fled alone.)

Miller says that he saw his way into the historical material, as a playwright, when he read in the record about a gesture of Abigail's toward John, a gesture revealing tenderness. Thus the play became possible for him when he saw sex as a motivation for Abigail's charges, to which he added land-greediness in others. (When Jean-Paul Sartre wrote the first screenplay of *The Crucible* in 1957, called *The Witches of Salem*, he saw the drama baldly as class war.) No one can quarrel with the possible truth of Miller's interpretation, but it's noteworthy that he couldn't envision his play until he saw it in sexual and material terms, which were not at all the supernatural terms in which the colonists and those "loftiest minds" saw it.

Besides these mundane reductions of motive, there are other points to consider. Once the characters are arranged in relation to one another, we simply watch the play unfold predictably. Of course this is also true of great tragedy, but *The Crucible*, as it moves along, seems more the fulfillment of an author's pattern than the grinding of an inexorable fate. And in that pattern there is a gap. Abigail, the Iago of the piece, runs away. Miller merely drops her when he has no further need of her. Not a Shakespearean tactic.

Yet this is the best Miller work that I know. (I haven't seen or read two recent plays.) First, the dialogue. In his modern plays, the dialogue sometimes sounds like squeaky shoes, stiff, uncomfortable. His writing seems much more at ease, more easily figurative and less dragooned into poetry, in the formalities of

the seventeenth century. (Miller acknowledges the help of a poet friend with the dialogue.) As for the wholeness of the work, there's no point in comparing it with such moribundities as *After the Fall* or *Incident at Vichy* or *The Price* or *Broken Glass*. The two comparable works are *A View from the Bridge* and *Death of a Salesman*. But the former is ultimately a bit of police news decked out with tragic garlands; and the latter does not, as it claims, dramatize the fall of a man, under worldly pressures, into self-delusion. Willy Loman is deluded from the beginning.

The Crucible has sinew. Despite Miller's compression of the metaphysical theme into sweaty contrivings, this is the play of his that comes closest to naked, ancient drama. Forty years after it was written, shorn of contemporary "utility," the play stands a bit taller, especially toward the end (Act IV of the original), where Proctor must make his gaunt choice. (When he rips up his false and cowardly confession, thus choosing the gallows, his wife, weeping, throws herself on him. He looks at the judges and says: "Give them no tear. Show honor now, show a stony heart and sink them with it.")

Miller made his own screen adaptation and, considerably experienced in this work, did it deftly. He has pruned his play for the sake of cinematic movement and expanded it for the same reason. (For instance, to let us see the girls dancing in the woods.) I don't understand why John and Elizabeth have their last private conversation on a beach, with the jailers a hundred yards away, when all they had wanted was to be alone; and I much prefer the way the play ends, with Elizabeth's closing lines after John leaves ("He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him"), to the film's finish on the gallows. But Miller has clearly had a fresh look at his work and has restructured it as if he had conceived it for the screen; he hasn't been content to saw up his play and re-tack it together.

Nicholas Hytner, the director, is less limber here than he was with *The Madness of King George* (1994). Once in a while he indulges in stage "pictures" rather than film flow; and once in a while he misses the center of the action. Early on, when one of the pseudo-paralyzed girls sits up, she is just discernible at the bottom left corner of the screen.

But, miraculously, Hytner has evoked something like a performance from Winona Ryder as Abigail. She doesn't reveal a burning talent, but at least she is here not the star of a college show. Daniel Day-Lewis, as Proctor, gets better the less he has to be a believable farmer and the more he becomes the protagonist of a moral drama. Joan Allen, who was Mrs. Nixon in *Nixon* (1995), has always been a rather cool actress, so the part of Elizabeth Proctor fits her. Paul Scofield is the senior judge and speaks his lines adequately. Scofield is of course a highly accomplished actor, but in some roles he does little more than burnish his lines carefully and serve them up on the silver salver of his experience. No bother about creating a man behind the lines. That's what he did as the King of France in Branagh's *Henry V* (1989), and that's what he does here.

Regrets about George Fenton's score. It sounds as if he had been listening to Leonard Bernstein's score for *On the Waterfront* (1954). Much heaviness, much tympani.

Dancing at Lugnasa, Pat O'Connor, 1998 (*The New Republic*, 30 November 1998)

Here is Meryl Streep again. (And, I hope, again and again.) Only a few weeks ago *One True Thing* (1998) presented her as an American housewife, with Streep struggling bravely to pry her role free of a cereal ad in a women's magazine. She had more success than the banal role deserved. Now she takes on a much more taxing challenge. She joins a cast of foreign actors and performs as one of the foreign group. In *Dancing at Lughnasa* she is one of five Irish sisters. The other four are played by native Irish actresses, and Streep—a New Jersey lass—comes off as truly Donegal as the rest of them.

Of course, accents have always been relished as chances for virtuosity in the Streep career—Polish in *Sophie's Choice* (1982), Dixie in *Silkwood* (1983), high British in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981)—but in few of the past films was she closely surrounded by a cluster of native speakers. Two of the prominent men in the Lughnasa cast are also non-Irish—Michael Gambon, playing the priest who is the sisters' brother, is English, and Rhys Ifans, the lover of one of the sisters, is Welsh—and they do well, but they do not need to belong to a tight nuclear group as Streep must and as she flawlessly succeeds in doing. I couldn't help wondering what the Irish women in the cast thought of their American sibling. It's easy to imagine an initial resentment as, for commercial reasons, a Yank film star took the dominant woman's role from an Irish actress; still, it's even easier to imagine how Streep's authenticity won them over. Anyway, imaginings aside, the result is marvelously homogeneous. For the ninety-four minutes of this film, Streep was born in Ballybeg in Donegal just as surely as her sisters were. Once more in a Streep transmutation, accent is almost the least of it, just one aspect of a created character in every shade of mind and soul.

Pat O'Connor, who directed *Circle of Friends* (1995) with warmth and flavor, treats *Dancing at Lughnasa* almost as the product of the Donegal countryside. For O'Connor, the rigor of the story, its rootedness and its attempts to break loose, seem the harvest of the landscape where it happens. (The year is 1936.) Frank McGuinness made the screenplay from Brian Friel's play—the same McGuinness who did the version of *A Doll's House* that was on Broadway a few seasons back—and has eased it into its new form with no more "opening up" than is helpful.

Which brings us to Friel's play itself. First, the title. Lugh, pronounced "Loo," was the Celtic god of the harvest. Lá Lughnasa, pronounced "Loonasa," was the god's feast day and, sixty years ago anyway—which may be one reason why the piece is set back in 1936—was still celebrated in some parts of rural Ireland with bonfires and dancing. Friel's play is not about the survival of paganism, however—not in any deistic sense. It deals with the suppression of earthy instincts and their inevitable explosion, and those instincts are here linked with primitivism. To be natural, the play implies, is to burrow beneath the strictures of our civilization. This theme is signaled at the very start: around the opening credits of this picture about Donegal folk we see African masks and sculptures. The film's license for the African objects comes from Jack, the brother of the five Mundy sisters, a priest who has spent many years in Uganda and, returned to this Donegal cottage somewhat muzzy in his mind, often adverts to his experience of Ugandan rituals.

The Mundy sisters range in age from the twenties well up into the forties, or beyond. Four of them are, presumably, virgins; one of them has a "love child," a boy, but no lover. In fact, during the play the boy's father comes to tell the boy's

mother that he's off to fight against Franco in the Spanish Civil War. The youngest sister, who is simple-minded, has a married man tagging after her to console him for his departed wife; she is willing, but her sisters interfere for her own good.

Into this small house of large congested feelings comes the family's first radio. It breaks down, and its repair coincides with a crisis in both the finances of the Mundys and the writhings of buried sexual feelings—along with, in Friel's somewhat patent design, the arrival of Lughnasa. As the radio feeds music into the cottage, one by one the sisters begin to dance, and the climax of the film is this uncharacteristic outburst of near-wild physicality—their own private Lughnasa. The film is able, aptly, to take that dancing outdoors so that they dance on the earth itself. What happens afterward is merely the subsiding of this brief ecstasy: the five sisters settle into lives that differ—but only in kinds of drabness—from their previous lives, as described for us by a voice-over.

This material could have made a solid one-act play, like Synge's *Riders to the Sea* or Frank O'Connor's *In the Train*, but Friel has drawn it out into a full-length work that, for all the crinkle and lilt in some of the dialogue, sags in the middle. Once we know the tension, the unsatisfied hungers among the sisters, we sit around waiting for the explosion. Very little integrated, organic drama grows between the exposition and the explosion. Friel fills in the interim with exploration of characters who are not, as he draws them, deeply explorable. (For instance, he plunks in several minutes with the sisters grouped around a table leafing through an old photo album, just to add body to the piece.) Then, after the outburst of dancing, the film is tied off hastily with that most glib of devices, the voice-over.

And that voice-over itself is strange. It is spoken by a man who was the boy of the story, looking back years later on this summer of 1936. A curious retrospect. We have seen a drama of bitterness, frustration, disintegration; but his memory of that summer, he says, "owes nothing to fact." He remembers it as a time when everyone was "floating on sweet sounds." Either Friel is trying to paint a golden glow on his dark story as it fades away or else he is trying to show us how memory, especially that of childhood, can shape the past the way we wish it had been. But if this latter is really what Friel intended, it makes the body of the play seem all the more attenuated—the lengthy posing of some grimness just so that a man, who was a boy then, can remember it otherwise.

But, Friel apart, the making of the film is impressive. In addition to Streep, her sisters are as vital as the script allows—even a bit more so: Catherine McCormack, Kathy Burke, Sophie Thompson, and (from the play's original cast) Brid Brennan. Gambon, by now a welcome figure, generates a kind of awesome pathos as the priest-brother who comes home dazed by Africa.

First Fictions

Charlie Bubbles, Albert Finney, 1967 (*The New Republic*, 9 March 1968)

Albert Finney has directed his first picture, and he also stars in it. Both the hero and the film are called *Charlie Bubbles*, but Charlie doesn't—which is the point of the story. In a different sense, this is also its downfall.

The script is by Shelagh Delaney, who wrote *A Taste of Honey* (film, 1961), and it tells of a few days in the life of a rich young English writer, originally from the Midlands, now living in London. He has found that success is hollow, folks. The film simply exposes, rather than dramatizes, some somnolent episodes in his life—like barely animated *tableaux* from a stale modern morality play—that show how Charlie's big London house and Rolls and fame do not compensate for the atrophy that has set in, that has already divorced him from both wife and child.

Not only does the picture fumble in its reach for revelation, it begins and ends with two completely phony "movie" scenes. In the first, Charlie and another Midlands writer slosh each other with food and sauces in a posh London restaurant. It is all done calmly with the men taking turns, and I daresay is meant to show their contempt for their new *luxe* life, but it is just bad Laurel and Hardy. At the very end Charlie goes off into the sky in the basket of a balloon that has suddenly appeared outside his house. In between the opening and closing, as Charlie drives up to the Midlands to visit his small son and ex-wife, we are treated to a series of scenes that are written like freshman imitations of Pinter. Finney's direction is imitation Antonioni. Here is still another director who thinks that, by putting in pauses and taking out climaxes, you make an Antonioni film.

There is certainly a story to be told about the hero of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) after, figuratively, he gets educated a bit, shows some talent, and makes a smash. Moreover, Charlie's own case has been duplicated, in several fields, many times in Britain's last decade. But we get here only a hint of the fundamental paradox: the Charlies have been struggling for centuries to get out of their class bondage and, once sprung, find that their class has nourished them, that they are starving without it. This is not to argue for a return; it is simply to prepare for some uncomfortable transition. If Charlie's little son grows up to be a success, he will probably be able to *enjoy* its hollowness.

I was glad to see Finney in the Broadway production of *Joe Egg* because it removed my fear, based on this film, that he was suffering from ambulatory catatonia. Like Director Finney, Actor Finney thinks that doing nothing is the way to represent spiritual void. Some of the others have an edge to them, like an ex-mistress, well and briefly played by Yootha Joyce. Billie Whitelaw, too long absent from the screen, gives a neat, embittered performance as the ex-wife. But Charlie's American secretary-assistant is played by Liza Minnelli. There is nothing to say about Minnelli, except that she is Judy Garland's daughter.

Progress report: This is the Year of Fellation in films. It was suggested in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and it is accomplished here—just off-camera.

***Coming Apart*, Milton Moses Ginsburg, 1969 (*The New Republic*, 15 November 1969)**

Coming Apart is awful, but it has some points of generic interest. First, it is part of the price we have to pay for some new freedoms in film. I don't mean that it is obvious pornography, squeezing in through a door opened by artists. It is something worse: fake seriousness, with the high-toned, college-trained, heavy

breathing of the New Superficial, the self-indulgence that quotes Pascal and writhes in *angst* but is not much more than exploitation with existential plumage. Of that school (which has its counterpart in fiction) *Coming Apart* is a ripe and repellent example.

Second, there is some small technical interest. The film is supposed to have been made by its protagonist, who has concealed a camera in his living room. There are not much more than three camera set-ups in the whole thing, mostly focused on a big sofa with a large wall-mirror behind it. We see people on the sofa and we also see them when they leave it. The idea of a camera hidden by the protagonist has been used to much better purpose in a film made a couple of years ago, as yet unreleased, *David Holzman's Diary* (1967), by Jim McBride. But its use in *Coming Apart*, fixed and facing that mirror, does create a sense of space-in-confinement.

The hero is a psychoanalyst, married. This room is neither his home nor his office but a pad to which he brings girls. (His wife also appears.) We are supposed to believe that it is the place where he disintegrates psychically, although this is a highly arbitrary development, intended to give depth to what is a series of sketches about making out with variously kooky girls. The psychic penetration and the spiritual agony are at about the level of Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1966)—skin-deep. There is one fairly funny sequence with a masochistic girl whose eagerness to be burned with cigarettes only embarrasses the hero. He is played by Rip Torn, who is gentle and likable throughout. The film was written and directed by Milton Moses Ginsberg, who has just sufficient cleverness, in several serious ways, to have a successful future ahead of him.

***Summer Paradise*, Gunnel Lindblom, 1977 (*The New Republic*, 25 March 1978)**

Summer Paradise is a family film in two senses. First, the film itself.

It begins with a woman in her sixties opening her apartment door but keeping the chain on. Outside is a woman of her own age whom she recognizes and admits. The first woman turns out to be a doctor, the second a social worker; they are old friends who frequently quarrel but who remain friends because their friendship is so old that, if for no other reason, it must be respected for its age. The doctor is closing her office, about to leave for the summer home where her family gathers every year. The social worker is off to a couple of conferences but will later join the doctor's family at the summer place.

From the fissure of the open/chained door, this Swedish film moves into a tale of openings-up that still keep on their guard chains. The shape of the story is familiar, but it's always an interesting device when used with insight: a social form is probed to show that it contains much that contradicts the sentiment of the form. In this case the family's annual reunion at the summer house, with some friends present, is and is not the pleasant occasion that the initial moments promise. If it were only what it seems to be at the start, the film would be soppy; if it were only the exact opposite, it would have the peculiar untruth of mere cynicism trying to "expose" human feeling.

The doctor, Birgitta Valberg, picks up her little granddaughter at the home of her older daughter, the stunning Agneta Ekmanner, who is in bed with a new

boyfriend when Valberg arrives. The doctor and the child go on ahead to be followed by the others. Up at the (lovely) country home, Valberg meets *her* parents. This focus on an old person that suddenly shifts to the old person's parents reminds one of the sudden lengthening of perspective in Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957) when Victor Sjöström, the old protagonist, suddenly goes to visit his mother. And this reminder of Bergman is not only in order, it brings up the second sense in which this is a family picture.

Summer Paradise was directed—her début—by Gunnel Lindblom, familiar as a Bergman actress (the randy sister in *The Silence* [1963], for instance). Lindblom has assisted Bergman on several of his theater productions and has herself directed in the theater. This first film of hers, made in 1977, was produced by Bergman.

The script was adapted from a novel by Ulla Isaksson by Isaksson and Lindblom. (The former wrote, among other scripts, *The Virgin Spring* [1960].) The "family" feeling of the film's making is pervasive and somehow cozy, like recognizing facial features in nephews and nieces. The summer reunion recalls the flashbacks in *Wild Strawberries,* the pivotal use of Midsummer Eve recalls *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955), the TV Flash of horror news from Lebanon recalls the Vietnam news on television in *Persona* (1966). These and other resemblances could hardly have occurred unwittingly: clearly, in form and subject and cinematic style, Lindblom is declaring herself a disciple of Bergman's. As such, she gets high marks. *Summer Paradise* is something like an early Bergman film made by a later Bergman. This material wouldn't interest him today as much as it once did, but it shows controls and balances that he didn't always have in his earlier days. So if *Summer Paradise* is not innovative or expanding in any way, it has a lot of pleasures in its making and in its humane concerns.

About fifteen characters are involved in the story, each of whom has some sort of drama or development. Synopsis would be pointless and unwieldy. The skill in the script and the direction is best shown by the fact that we never get the feeling of having to wait until each character gets a turn, as in a long vaudeville bill. All *seems* to go forward more or less simultaneously and interrelatedly, as the summer house gets filled up with loves and troubles and disappointments and reconciliations and the inevitable strand of tragedy. Characters are drawn with an eye to contradictions. Valberg herself, for instance, is not just lovable old Grandma Doctor, though she is that, too: she is a woman who didn't know how to live with a man and has passed the defect on in some degree to both her daughters, the older of whom seems, besides her harvesting of males, to have some interest in lesbianism. Valberg's father is a doting old patriarch but is also an egocentric king for whom respect comes both naturally and hard. The social worker, when she gets there, is happy to be with these people in this place, but she is driven almost to madness by their complete disregard of the ills and stupidities in the world that are, she believes, pushing mankind toward doom. All this is interwoven with the dailiness of each day—with the food for instance. Molnár says, truly, in *The Play's the Thing*: "Audiences always like to see actors eating." The great platters and bowls of beautiful food passed around the outdoor luncheon table do a great deal to certify the plus side of the family's ledger and to provide the atmosphere against which poignancy is created.

Why is it all not soap opera? Mod soap opera, of course, in which problems militate. Well, I'm not absolutely sure that it's *not* soap opera—that is, a braid of

small-scale domestic dramas presented more for the exercise of familiar responses than for any real extension of experience. (Quite unlike Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* [1973], for instance, which cuts clean away from any such suspicion.) But, first of all, good soap opera is in one way like good anything: namely, good. Second, the intensity with which the materials of the various dramas are connected with matters larger than themselves gives them, if not depth, at least some status. Third, unlike Paul Mazursky's recent *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), there is no feeling of a checklist of hot topics being ticked off: the troubles and trials seem generated and spontaneous. Thus the script doesn't live beyond its means. And last—again unlike Mazursky's film—it's all well done.

Lindblom has modeled her directing on her master's. The camera movement and the editing follow the impulse of the scene. Such dogmas as reaction shots or "don't cut between lines" mean nothing to her. The filming seems to fit each sequence like a well-tailored garment: no wrinkles, no droops, no shortages. The only moment that bothered me was the very last when the camera closed up on the freeze-frame shot of an autistic boy. (He's the son of Ekmanner's woman friend.) I wasn't disturbed so much because of the resemblance to the last moment of *The Four Hundred Blows* (1959) but because I didn't know why we were ending with him, of all characters. Why not the old doctor with whom we began?

Tony Forsberg's color photography is in the discreet Gunnar Fischer-Sven Nykvist line, though not quite up to it. Alan Blair's subtitles are succinct. The actors are exactly what we want: we feel they've always been there, have never done anything but live these lives.

Only a few of them are familiar. Valberg played Max von Sydow's wife in *The Virgin Spring*. Sif Ruud, the social worker, has been in various Bergman films. Ekmanner was in Sontag's *Duet for Cannibals* (1969). The patriarch is Holger Löwenadler, who was the girl's father in Malle's *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974). And lest Lindblom seem guilty (some guilt!) of using a lot of fine actors who do all the acting work for her, so to speak, I note the mordant performance of the autistic boy by Toni Magnusson, in which the director must surely have figured.

But the fact that only a few of the faces were familiar, and none of them was *very* familiar, made me wonder about the different effect that this film must have had in Sweden. Not because of the language: my question could apply to a British film or if I understood Swedish. All of these actors, most of them relatively new to me, are well-known to Swedish audiences, some of them through decades in various Swedish theaters, all of them through films we have not seen or through TV. I saw people, then actors. A Swedish audience would see actors, then people. There are advantages both ways, if the work is good, but it made me realize again that any picture shipped out of its country of origin becomes to some degree a different film. (I once saw *M*A*S*H* [1970] with Icelandic subtitles in Reykjavik, and I'd give a great deal to know what the absolutely silent audience thought they were seeing.) For me, meeting many of these actors for the first time in *Summer Paradise* gave the picture a dimension of *verismo*; but seeing them again, as I hope I shall do in other pictures, will give me a somewhat different pleasure: affirmations of shared experience.

***Gal Young 'Un,* Victor Nuñez, 1979 (*The New Republic*, 9 May 1981)**

A group called First Run Features has assembled seventeen independent American films and is showing them in a three-month program at the Art Theater in New York. Some of them have been seen previously; many of them are now, or are soon going to be, in several other cities. Occasionally, the bill as such will be presented in other cities. "Independent" means, almost always, low budget; what it certainly means, if a film reaches the screen still identified as "independent," is that none of the big distributors has picked it up, that it is having to make its way screen by screen. So far I've seen only one of the seventeen being handled by FRF, but, so far, cheers!

Gal Young 'Un is fiction, made from a story by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, probably best remembered as the author of *The Yearling*, which was filmed in 1946. Like a lot of Rawlings' stories, *Gal Young 'Un* is about poor Florida whites in the 1920s. All the work on the film except the acting was done by Victor Nuñez—the adaptation, the directing, the photography, and the editing.

Nuñez's single best achievement is his casting and his direction of his cast. If he had been given a $10 million budget, he could have had better-known people but not necessarily better ones. It's easy to imagine certain familiar actors in the principal roles, but what's astonishing about this cast is that you don't want to. When you remember this picture and think of those characters, you can't think of them otherwise than as embodied by those actors, even when you fantasize about their lives before or after or laterally out of the story. This is an acid test.

It's Prohibition time, there's moonshining and bootlegging. A good-looking young scoundrel, David Peck, marries a lonely widow, Dana Preu, just because she has a house out in the country, some cash, and a good location for a still. She learns his reasons after the marriage; accepts her fate; accepts—as fitting her wifely lot—her work in the running of the still, although nothing like that has ever been part of her life. Peck soon buys a flashy car and goes off on selling trips of at least a week. She accepts this, too, stoically, even affectionately. Then, on one return, he brings home a girl whom he installs in an upstairs bedroom. Which he sometimes visits. The girl is played by J. Smith, who, if she keeps on acting, won't change her name, I hope.

The wife turns. Up to now she has accepted everything, whether she liked it or not, as part of her wifely portion. The girl's intrusion changes everything because it changes the marriage. The end, even the twist after the end, can be foreseen, but this doesn't hurt. It would matter in most films that masquerade as realism but are just malarkey: *Gal Young 'Un* is very far from masquerade, so its realism holds us even when we know how it's unfolding.

Peck is a credible self-justifying country skunk, with enough sex and con to get away with selfishness most of the time, and with the old device of falling back on tribal feeling, "belonging" in these parts, knowing these folks, as part of his license and excuse. J. Smith catches perfectly the non-vicious amorality of a homeless kid who does more or less what men tell her to do and sleeps where she's told because she has neither choice nor standards, but who is in fact a good-hearted innocent, whose residual innocence finally saves her.

The kingpin—queenpin—is Preu, however, as the loyal, terse, dignified widow. I've read that Preu is by profession an English teacher. She is also a natural film actor—at least with Nuñez's help. She is able to concentrate her imagination and body on a state of being/feeling with no worry about external revelation of

that state, with the ability to let the "visibility" of that state come through, the ability (as they say) to let the camera find it. This is a talent and is not open to anyone simply by not "acting." It is the gift of unspoken film expressiveness, and Preu has it. When the camera holds on her, she holds us. What helps to certify this talent is Preu's validity on either side of taciturnity, when she has to express emotion, which she always does authentically. But it is with her power of implication that she pulls the film into small strong shape.

If Nuñez were as confident in other departments as he is with his actors, the film would be even stronger. It's flawed by just what he doesn't do with his actors—over-directing. The camera tracks superfluously; there are uncalled-for close-ups and handheld sequences, reverse shots or additional shots of a scene for no apparent reason. The framing shows occasional touches of the arty. His sense of timing occasionally lapses: when he cuts from a face with a question to another face with an answer, he sometimes misses half a beat, like a cue picked up too slowly on stage.

I emphasize that these are flaws in a good film that could have been better. Nuñez is now thirty-five and is working. He gives us real reasons to hope.

***Smithereens*, Susan Seidelman, 1982 (*The New Republic*, 6 December 1982)**

One of my favorite critical anecdotes: A Paris literary critic, ca. 1900, wrote a long essay proving that naturalism was dead. Another critic, away from Paris at the time, heard about the essay just as it was going to press and immediately telegraphed the first man: "Naturalism not dead. Letter follows."

Letters have been following for some time now, and they have generally been right. Naturalism did not die: it persisted pluralistically, as it had been and also in mutation. The first wave of naturalistic art, the Goncourt-Zola wave, was meant to shake the paunchy bourgeoisie with seamy facts that they were eager to ignore. That sort of naturalism held center stage for only a few decades, until symbolism and other successors took the spotlight, but even in its pristine form, naturalism never disappeared. And in recent decades, it has taken on a new being. The morphology is the same, the intent different. Naturalism is no longer used as a fact-bearer but as a truth-teller; it no longer brings us information about our society, which we can now get from multiple other sources: it has become a style, one of the stylistic options available to the artistic imagination. This is especially clear in the theater with the plays of, for instance, David Storey (England), Franz Xaver Kroetz (Germany), and Wolfgang Bauer (Austria).

In film, surprisingly, naturalism has had a somewhat different history—surprisingly because film might seem to be the perfect and permanent medium for "classical" naturalism. And from earliest days—von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924) is not the first example—"classical" naturalism has had a place in film. But, in part because naturalism *is* so easy for film, it has moved to deeper dimensions, greater complexities.

Yvette Biró treats the matter, along with other important issues, in her thoughtful new book, *Profane Mythology: The Savage Mind of the Cinema* (Indiana University Press). Says Biró:

The usual methods of recording reality had been transformed into the

> reality of recording. . . . In what lies film's originality . . .? First of all, in the prosaic nature of its symbolization, in the profane concreteness of abstraction. . . . Natural existence is realized in direct physical movements and reactions. . . . The film lifts memorable elements out of their usual surroundings, cleanses them, pares them down, and then holds them close to us. Thus we see a hitherto hidden but very expressive face.

This power lies to any filmmaker's hand as the power of an automobile lies to the hand of any fool who can turn an ignition key. Many of the dullest and/or exploitative cinematic minds have been quick to exploit that cinematic power. "Memorable moments" have not been their concern: all they have focused on is the facile use of this power. Think of Warhol and, especially, his epigones.

But a new American film, superficially akin to the Warhol school, moves into some of the domain that Biró describes; it understands the principle of concreteness as abstraction. For the first few minutes *Smithereens* seems like one more post-film-school student film, dealing in somewhat jagged terms with materials closest to the director's experience and purse, justifying itself by the mere fact of being a film. But this director, Susan Seidelman, explores the gritty lives of young people in SoHo with vision and *idea*, and the result is a work of odd, pertinent, artistic substance.

This is Seidelman's first feature: she has made three previous shorter films. With Ron Nyswaner, she devised this story, then Nyswaner and Peter Askin wrote the screenplay. Those facts are relevant in a peculiarly partial way; it's quickly apparent that the events of the story are trite, and it's quickly apparent that this is unimportant. I soon began to think (certainly not because of the subject) of Scott Fitzgerald's stories about a Hollywood agent named Pat Hobby. The stories as such are mostly poor, some of them are dreadful; but read as a whole, the Pat Hobby stories take on depth because the narratives become the background: Pat's character and the Hollywood milieu are what matter.

With *Smithereens* Seidelman seems to have decided that she needed some sort of action, some arrangement of encounters and rebuffs and problems for her heroine, simply to keep the young woman in motion: but the story would simply be a means of enabling us to spend some time with the heroine, to see her world with her in it. The events serve as kinetic filler, while we watch and listen and perceive. What the film is really about is not what happens but the heroine's condition: her hassled, befuddled response to contemporary American hype, her ambition to float in a sea of trashy chic.

The woman is played by Susan Berman, who is quite right for the part in temperament and in looks—blithely gaunt. We first see her in the subway, pasting up Xerox copies of a photograph or handing them to people. These are photos of herself, and the only words on them are "Who Is This?" Our first apprehensive reaction is that this is going to be a film about a search for identity: but it's nothing so conventional, so formulaic. Her handouts are a search for *publicity*—publicity to no definable end, just publicity. Berman has come to New York to be part of The Scene, to differentiate herself from her married and baby-bearing sister, somehow to be borne aloft, somehow to be part of the swing and the dazzle.

She works in a Xerox copy center, yet is locked out of her room for nonpayment of rent. She flops where and with whom she can. Two men figure. One is a sweet youth from Montana, played reticently by Brad Rinn, who lives in a

van parked in a vacant lot on the lower West Side. (His quiet, vulnerable devotion is the one "fictional" touch in the picture. Montana=Sweetness. Why does someone from the Wide Open Spaces have to be like Gary Cooper? Why not like Gary Gilmore?) And there is a rock musician, coolly played by Richard Hell, who tolerates her from time to time and finally dumps her. By then she has lost Montana Slim, whose patience has frazzled. At the end she is walking along the streets, carrying her bags, bound nowhere; is buzzed by a man in a car; ignores him, is pursued by him. He asks whether she has any *other* place to go. She halts and turns to him in a (regrettable) freeze frame.

The moral tone of this film is unearned despair; that, I emphasize, is its chosen tone, not my criticism. In a recent Italian film called *The Meadow* (1979), when young people sat around and wallowed in hopelessness, they were irritating because they were supposed to be intellectuals, superior beings who had looked into the empty hand of a nonexistent God but who affected the viewer only as egocentric louts, wasting good lives that were available to them. Not Berman or her friends. They haven't peered into anything; all they have are poses—with cigarettes. When Berman is abandoned by the rock musician at the end, she says to another girl, whom he has also abandoned, that she has been, figuratively, fucked. The other girl says bitterly, "Life is fucked." The line is a pitifully juvenile profundity and, for that reason, exactly right. Berman and peers are not the victims of existential despair or anomie or any collapse that requires a height from which to fall. She and her peers are more or less where they have always been, the walking wounded of bombardment by hype—by disc-jockey, discotheque, *National Enquirer*, TV-commercial, carbonic-gas-injected hype. And all she has is a hunger to be the subject of that hype—maybe by some sort of connection with a rock group—instead of its victim.

Two elements in this film are especially strong. First is the verity of the girl. She is stupid, deceitful, desperate, like some sort of crawly insect that attaches itself to any available surface, especially a glitzy one. The unswerving disregard for audience sympathy with which she is written and directed and played commands respect and attention.

The other element is Seidelman's filmmaking skill. *Smithereens* shows fluency, a good eye, control. First films often look skimpy, as if just enough footage had been shot to splice together a cogent narrative. *Smithereens* feels easy, selective; in fact, Seidelman had so much to choose from in some sequences that she overedits a bit, works in too many reverse angles, too many tracking shots. Some economy, particularly toward the end, would have helped.

Her film made me think of *Wanda* (1970), which was written and directed by the late Barbara Loden, with Loden in the leading role. *Wanda*, which I think is an ignored small gem, is far superior to *Smithereens*, but it too deals with a young woman subjected to emotional battering. In Loden's film, the assault is by male selfishness; in Seidelman's it's by incessant glitz. Both films, as it happens, end with a freeze frame, as the protagonist is apparently entering on a life of whoring, the one security that's left.

Wanda is a fine work of "classical" naturalism. *Smithereens* is less deft and, essentially, less traditional: it moves past "the recording of reality" to "the reality of recording." In Biró's term, it is an abstraction made concrete. It doesn't want to wring our withers with a new kind of tragic fall, a dumb-prole protagonist instead of a queen. It uses sur-naturalism to abstract concretely the being of this self-

centered girl who has no certifiable self. It shows us that the camera can find and dramatize the center of such a being unaided by two thousand years of conditioning by tragedy. No one can be deeply moved by the fate of this girl. That is precisely what this film is deliberately and movingly *about*.

***Withnail and I*, Bruce Robinson, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 13 & 20 July 1987)**

If you remember Truffaut's *Story of Adèle H.* (1975), you will remember Bruce Robinson, whether or not you know his name: he played the English lieutenant pursued by Adèle. Years later, wearing another hat, he wrote the screenplay of *The Killing Fields* (1984). Now, adding still another hat, he has written and directed *Withnail and I*. It's a small, delightfully neat picture in a valuable tradition: film as memoir. Examples are plentiful; Truffaut himself with *The Four Hundred Blows* (1959) is only one such. Robinson uses the form to make history of a rite of his own passage.

He is the "I," of course, and Withnail is a coeval young actor in the London of 1969. Both are unemployed much of the time, living in a dirty, overstuffed cheap flat on unemployment checks, drinking a great deal, smoking as much pot as they can get, quite consciously being end-of-the-'60s characters. Withnail is the general of this two-man army, but it's the "I" who decides that they need a break from London seediness. Withnail has a wealthy fat pouf of an uncle who lends them his cottage in the country. Uncle Monty, however, doesn't add that he plans to visit them because he has a lech for the "I." Before, during, and after the country stay, comedy keeps flavoring the scrapes, with the added spice of commotion recollected in tranquility. The memoir ends, as does the decade, with the narrator getting a decent acting job and leaving Withnail, who, in the last shot, quotes Hamlet to console and justify himself.

With an access of hindsight, we perceive that the narrator is really the stronger of the pair though he generally sees himself dominated. But Robinson evidently remembers this year in his life as his Withnail period, and, wittily and sharply, he shows us why it mattered. Self-dramatization was a keynote of the time, a mode of which Withnail was a master; and he mastered his friend. Part of their drama was the belief that they lived in a decade as in a place, so that, when the decade ended, they had to move as from a place.

Robinson's writing is carefully brisk (although, as in many British films, some of the throwaway lines are lost to American ears). His directing is good: he knows where to look and for how long. Paul McGann is thoughtfully taking as the narrator. But three elements guarantee the film's quality. Peter Hannan's camera makes the London squalor almost Dickensian and makes the green of the English countryside rightly unreal as a background for this ultra-urban pair. Richard Griffiths as the epicurean-lecherous uncle delightfully overarticulates speech and movement. And Richard E. Grant is dark and dashing as Withnail, a sensitive soul doomed to an insufficiently appreciative, insufficiently alcoholic world.

Quibble if you like that Robinson frequently wanders from the narrator's view by showing us scenes in which "I" isn't present. (That last shot, for instance.) The real test of formal violations is: Are we glad they happened? Here we certainly are. At the end the very violations help to give the film its neatness: its encasement

of the time in one man's life when it was possible to be irresponsible.

Wish You Were Here, David Leland, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 3 August 1987)

Wish You Were Here is a fairly bright English comedy-drama written by David Leland, co-author of the strained script of *Mona Lisa* (1986), sole writer of the not quite bearable *Personal Services* (1987). His latest is very much better, possibly because he directed it himself—his first such job. The script's basic idea is familiar and the ending is mechanically happy, but there's considerable honesty in the film, along with some humorously rough situations and some brisk dialogue.

A willful, wild adolescent girl is growing up in an English seaside town. The time is 1951, and her wartime childhood is implicated in our very first glimpse of her—in a gas mask. Her wildness makes trouble for her hairdresser father but is exploited by a young swain and by a man of her father's age. Very quickly we are put in the necessary perspective: we see the maddening effect she has on other people, and we see those people as maddening from her point of view. Binding the two views together is the girl's aloof amusement at both.

Leland uses more flashbacks than are necessary, and he leans on lower-middle-class English tackiness in a rerun of the John Osborne-Tony Richardson exaggerations in *The Entertainer* (film, 1960). But he has a keen eye, warm sympathies, and some subtleties in cinematic treatment. All through this film about an adolescent's travail runs a frieze of ancient people: after she bicycles down the boardwalk, an antique man is pushed past in a wheelchair; in the tearoom where she is a waitress, the lady pianist is an elderly peony; under the hood of a stalled motor car, an aged owner works to get it going.

Tom Bell as the girl's dominator then suppliant is grimly, metallically sexy. Heathcote Williams (a playwright too little known) is snappily comic in his one scene as a psychiatrist. The girl herself, Emily Lloyd—sixteen when the film was made—is perfect: so perceptive, so shaded, so moving, so irresistibly funny she makes us think that she's performing well within her limits, that she can do much more. I hope she does.

Lonely Woman Seeks Life Companion, Viacheslav Krishtofovich, 1987 (*The New Republic*, 19 March 1990)

Lonely Woman Seeks Life Companion is an unusual Soviet film, though that adjective may soon become inappropriate. What was once thought of as the usual Soviet film may fade away. This well-turned screenplay by Viktor Merezhko is close, intimate, finely calibrated. Essentially it's a two-character picture, though other people function in the story.

Klavdia, a forty-two-year-old seamstress in Kiev, puts up notices on five telephone poles inviting the attention of single men. The first man who rings the doorbell of her small apartment is a pleasant drunk, Valentin. (She never meets another candidate.) Reluctantly she allows him to come in, though she is unattracted. He turns out to be not only clever but intelligent and perceptive, and although things start rather roughly—in their first meeting he tries to rob her, and she crowns him with an ironing board—a relationship of tacit feelings, needs,

recognitions develops. At the finish the future is left somewhat open-ended and nebulous for Klavdia, yet a clearer finish, happy or not, might have seemed too neat.

Viacheslav Krishtofovich, the director, has worked a good deal in television. That may have been the perfect preparation for this first feature. Most of it is between two people, mostly the camera is in close, and Krishtofovich deals with these facts as opportunity, not constriction. Directing as if it were a chamber work, more reliant on nuance than on large climax, he brings off the film very well.

Alexander Zbruyev, as Valentin, gives a performance like a self-peeling onion, except that at the center there is a complex man. Irina Kupchenko, as Klavdia, is an actress of dignity, humor, and despair, with the ability to fill silences with self. The four main artists—writer, director, and two principal actors—make this film a small, savory treat.

A World Apart, Chris Menges, 1988 (*The New Republic*, 18 & 25 July 1988)

A World Apart, set in South Africa in 1963 and centered on the struggle against apartheid, is an autobiographical film. Largely. Shawn Slovo, who wrote the screenplay, has changed names of characters, but in a postscript she identifies the woman called Diana Roth as her mother, Ruth First. The daughter, called Molly instead of Shawn, is only one of two central characters. The story is thus not told entirely from Shawn/Molly's point of view: a great deal of the film concerns Diana's actions when away from her daughter. Slovo must have reconstructed those episodes from what her mother either told her or wrote in her book *One Hundred and Seventeen Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation* (1965).

The father, Gus Roth—to stick to film names—exits the film right at the start, leaving South Africa on mysterious business. (The actual man, Joe Slovo, is now in Zambia, the only white member of the executive committee of the African National Congress.) The action of the film is double: the struggle of Diana in support of black freedom, which is made even more difficult by a new law that allows the government to detain anyone for ninety days without inquiry; the struggle of the thirteen-year-old Molly to maintain normal relations with her school chums and with her mother, made more difficult by the latter's imprisonment. Diana's travail is terrible, but in a sense it is simpler than her daughter's. Diana knows who she is and why she is suffering, including her worries about her children. (There are three others, younger than Molly.) Molly doesn't yet know quite who she is or what is happening: the facts are clear to her but not much of their resonance. The basic movement in the story is Molly's growth to some true awareness.

There's nothing really new in this film, but material doesn't have to be new to be moving. The familiar South African battle lines—what else can they be called?—are drawn again. Some attempt is made to deal fairly with the ruling whites: a teacher in Molly's school explains that what we Americans call the Boer War was their war for independence, like the American one; police officials are proud that they are less brutal with a white woman than with other detainees. But the rooted, tragic war grinds on.

Slovo's screenplay has its blemishes. Bits seem left over or left out: coming downstairs from her office with Molly near the start, Diana suddenly says she has

forgotten something and goes back up to get it. The return is made to seem important, but that's the end of the sequence. When a pleasant occasion happens, like a black and white celebration or a birthday party for the six-year-old Roth, we know it will be interrupted unpleasantly. Near the end Diana is under strict house arrest, constantly watched, yet she manages to attend a black man's funeral. How? The Roths live in a lovely large house with several servants, yet no mention is made of the source of their money. Diana's job couldn't supply it.

The most disturbing element in the script is its treatment of communism. Several times in the picture, people call the Roths Communists. No reply is ever made, and not one word on the subject is uttered in the privacy of the Roth home. The implication—for American viewers, anyway—is that those name-callers are facile Red-baiters, the sort that every American liberal is only too familiar with, and that the accusation is false. As Slovo handles it, the ignoring of the charge promotes this assumption. But the Roths *were* Communists, and Slovo diminishes their honesty by not having them or their friends say so. From her parents' point of view, it would not be a confession but a full statement of their political selves. Obviously, for commercial reasons, it's better to fudge the matter, but fudging is a sorry business in a film about political agony and martyrdom. (Diana—Ruth First, that is—was killed some years later by a parcel bomb.)

Almost everything in the making of the film is extraordinarily good. (Exception: the music by Hans Zimmer portentously telegraphs drama to come.) *A World Apart* is the first fiction feature directed by Chris Menges, the excellent cinematographer of *The Mission* (1986). Under his hand, Peter Biziou provides perfectly competent camera work, but the welcome surprise is that Menges has concentrated on the acting—with fine results. It's all solid, confident, strong.

David Suchet, as Diana's chief interrogator in prison, conveys, in the course of his stern questionings, that he is falling a little in love with her. Diana's mother is forcefully played by Yvonne Bryceland, a long-time associate of Athol Fugard and a leading South African actress. Linda Mvusi, the Roths' maid and Molly's darling, is a simple, compassionate black goddess.

Barbara Hershey plays Diana and is phenomenal. The phenomenon has been growing for some time. Her first screen appearances in 1968 were appealing, and in recent years—*Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *Hoosiers* (1986), *Tin Men* (1987)—she has grown as an actress. Reportedly, her most complex role was in Konchalovsky's *Shy People* (1987), which has not yet been shown in the United States. It was this performance that led to Diana: Menges was the cinematographer of *Shy People* and wanted no other woman than Hershey for this role.

She has done what is widely held to be impossible for a film actor, untrained in any formal way and confined to what's available in most film and TV scripts: she has become technically adept and, more astonishing, she has greatly deepened. Hershey began in the gelatin-mold Movieland way, picked up by an agent out of a high school production in Hollywood. What ought to have lain ahead of her other than a rerun of the Lana Turner career? But her performance of Diana, especially in the prison sequences, comes from warm understanding and the vigorous, direct means to express it. There's never a false move or sound, never a sense of "big scenes." In the late sequences she is afflicted with crude makeup to show her prison sufferings (how could Menges's eye have accepted it?), and she even triumphs over that. Her accent is more British than corkscrew South African, but at least she never loses it.

Jodhi May, the English girl who plays Molly, is irresistible, almost precisely because she seems so resistible at first. Not only is she not particularly pretty, her features lack distinction; she is slightly round-shouldered, and she is given a real mixing-bowl haircut. These very matters become endearing before long, become essential to the Molly that she believes in and creates. The adolescent still has some of the overt dependencies of a child (soon to become covert), and she has enough intelligence to know that her demands are childish even though she can't help making them. As Diana's political convictions lead to separation from her family, Molly begins to resent her mother's choices; to the daughter, those choices imply more concern with activism than with family, a willingness to be separated from them. May gives these angers full body and, with Menges's help, also gives us the blossoming adult beneath them who understands her mother's courage.

The fate of gifted adolescent actors is even more unpredictable than that of gifted adults. Whatever became, for instance, of the marvelous Patricia Gozzi, who in the early sixties was in *Sundays and Cybele* (1962) and *Rapture* (1965)? I hope that, twenty years from now, the same question won't be asked about Jodhi May.

***The Music of Chance*, Philip Haas, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 21 June 1993)**

Paul Auster is a lucky man. The first film version of one of his novels does it justice. Justice may be an odd word to use in connection with an Auster novel; so is luck. Nonetheless, the terms seem to apply, because the film is first class.

Talent applies, too, of course. *The Music of Chance* was adapted for the screen by Philip Haas and his wife, Belinda Haas. He then directed, she edited; together they have made a picture that is serenely eccentric, perfectly modeled, exquisitely seen. Like Auster's work, it is (choose one) dreamily realistic/realistically dreamlike.

Philip Haas, though American, began professional life in the London theater as an assistant director with the Royal Shakespeare Company. He moved into film and made a number of documentaries about contemporary artists and about purely ethnic artists, such as Australian aborigines. Belinda Haas, born in Belfast, came to the United States to study journalism, became a TV producer, then in 1988 joined with Philip as writer and editor. Auster's novel is their feature film début. It's the richest American début, in both accomplishment and promise, since Hal Hartley, Steven Soderbergh, and Jim Jarmusch—with all of whom they share an interest in evocative understatement.

About the producers of this picture I'll say only that backers of this enterprise needed courage and devilry. The cinematographer was the Frenchman Bernard Zitzermann, the magician who put Ariane Mnouchkine's *Molière* (1978) on film and who has worked with Haas on a documentary. The casting and the look of the production are in such accord that it's almost as if the actors were created by the production designer, Hugo Luczyc-Wyhowski.

Auster's novel begins with a rootless man, James Nashe, a former Boston fireman, who, after inheriting some money, buys a good car and, with no particular plan in mind, simply drives around the United States. (Why, by the way, did the film change his Saab to a BMW?) One day Nashe is en route to New York when he picks up a beaten and bloody young man, Jack Pozzi, who turns out to be a professional card player.

Nashe has about $10,000 left of his inheritance, and with it, he backs Pozzi in a poker game with two rich recluses in a New Jersey mansion. Pozzi and Nashe lose, and are stripped of everything; they agree to work off their debts. The rich men have imported stones from the walls of an Irish castle. The two losers agree to build a wall with those stones in a meadow below the mansion—at a daily rate that will liquidate the debt in three months. During the work, there are extraordinary developments.

If this story sounds mad, then I've outlined it well. The film's triumph—Auster's, to begin with—is to make one step follow another logically, though in conspectus it all seems weirdly askew. The frame-by-frame credence rests with the actors, who never falter. They are led by Mandy Patinkin, impressive as Nashe. From the first glimpse, Patinkin suggests a man with depths to be mined, depths that he himself may not have mined.

Another first glimpse, of James Spader as Pozzi, is a bit unsettling. With his black-dyed hair, his distorted speech, his whining, Spader's first impression is of mere acting. But gradually a man slips in, to make the performance a portrait of that man. Charles Durning, actually working for a change instead of coasting on his corpulence, gives one of the recluses an amusing, stern solidity. His partner is the wispy Joel Grey. (The Laurel-and-Hardy resemblance is noted in the film.) Grey's presence is really all that is needed, and he supplies it reticently. M. Emmet Walsh, as the recluses' caretaker, has just the right servile nastiness (the "It's-not-my-fault-I'm-just-doing-my-job" syndrome). For someone like me, who has just been through the Holocaust Museum, Walsh's performance has a reminiscent ring of camp guards. It's not impossible that this was in Auster's mind.

Auster's mind—there's a subject. He is a coolly subversive writer in a delicate and insidious way. Not for Auster any apparent anarchy of form or style: he composes smoothly, the tone is placid. But out of the ordinary texture, strange patterns and forces emerge, as if lovely green trees along the way suddenly reach out to strangle us.

The deceptive word in the title here is "chance": nothing happens in an Auster novel by chance. A man (in an earlier novel) goes for walks along certain Manhattan streets without forethought, and his walks begin to describe certain patterns. In *The Music of Chance* Nashe, nearing the end of his freedom to wander, gives a lift to a man who seems to offer a way to extend that freedom. (Two minor points. Nashe spent seven years in the Boston fire department; the recluses made their money seven years ago. Nashe has $10,000 left; there are 10,000 stones in the meadow for the wall. In an Auster novel, these are not accidents.) The encounter has drastic results. The film softens those results, but not without Auster's approval—he himself plays a bit part in the new ending.

What is the source of design in Auster? Smirking gods? I think not. There is no hint in what I've read of his work of the Thornton Wilder syndrome. (Some people are killed, seemingly senselessly, when the bridge of San Luis Rey collapses. We learn subsequently why heaven thought it was time for them to go.) Auster insists that design is a drug. He doesn't say that, whatever our beliefs, fate operates. He says that, whatever our beliefs, his novels exist to supply a fate for the fate-hungry, to demonstrate that, fundamentally, fate and design are desperate human inventions.

In *The Music of Chance* the Joel Grey recluse has constructed a City of the World—something like an architect's model, with figures two inches high, in

which everything important in his life is happening simultaneously. While Nashe and Pozzi labor on their wall, the wall is replicated in the model. I think the City of the World is a paradigm of how fascinating yet nonbinding the idea of fate is for Auster. Nashe steals figures of the recluses from the model and subsequently burns them. Result? Nothing that would not otherwise have happened. The model is actually a mockery of design.

All this matches Auster's idea of character. He seems to respect but ultimately to disregard centuries-old procedures of characterization. He begins conventionally enough, then he simply has people behave as he needs them to behave. His gravity of tone lends believability to his overall patterns; that same gravity makes us accept his people as players in his game.

And that gravity of tone informs, synesthetically, Philip Haas's direction, which catches the Austerian wryly grave tone and which is supported by Belinda Haas's astringent editing. Thus they fulfill both the design and the skepticism about design in this fascinating, intelligent, deceptively lucid film.

Mina Tannenbaum, Martine Dugowson, 1994 (*The New Republic*, 6 March 1995)

O François Truffaut, thou art mighty yet! Here is a new French film in which: the nurses in a maternity ward waltz dreamily in the hospital corridor with infants in their arms; scenes are replayed in a way that a participant would have preferred; a young woman's first sight of a handsome young man is shown in slow motion; private thoughts on the soundtrack counterpoint conversations; a choric character occasionally addresses the camera; a spotlight irises out on a character. And there's more—all reminders of the late 1950s when Truffaut and colleagues burst upon us in the New Wave.

Let's be glad of the reminders, say I. *Mina Tannenbaum* is the feature début of a gifted writer-director, Martine Dugowson, who treats these New Wavelets with such delight and surge that she seems an inheritor, not an imitator. Her own delicacy, her wit and insight are so clear that she seems exactly the right artist to advance the sector of film possibility first opened by Truffaut & Co.

Dugowson's film could have been called *Mina and Ethel*. Mina Tannenbaum is born on the same day as Ethel Bénégui in 1958 in a Paris hospital. These two Jewish girls meet in a ballet class when they are children and, through childhood escapades and quarrels, incisively yet lightly handled, they become fast friends. Their friendship is the gist of what we see, as they move through the years into their thirties. Boys occur, then men. Professions arrive—painting for Mina, journalism for Ethel. Their friendship serves as a bond and sometimes a barrier between them, but it cuts much deeper than they or we have realized. The ending of the story is as shocking and almost as retrospectively deepening, as the ending of *Jules and Jim* (1962).

The mutations of affectation and irritation between them are set in a context of Parisian Jewish life in the postwar years. Mina's mother, a camp survivor, won't allow her daughter's young German acquaintances into their home in the 1970s. Ethel's mother, on her deathbed, plagues her daughter yet again about getting a Jewish husband. If Dugowson doesn't explore the milieu the way that Claude Berri and Diane Kurys have done, her family touches are warm with

authenticity.

Neither high drama nor intimate comedy is the point of *Mina Tannenbaum*, though it has some of the former and much of the latter. Like a lot of good fiction and some good films, its purpose is texture, not plot. Dugowson has such understanding of her people, such faith in them, that she makes us feel lucky to accompany these two young women through the years. There are two moments I could have done without, however: fantasies with clips of Rita Hayworth and Bette Davis. These jokes seem too facile for Dugowson's subtle touch. Otherwise she says much with little—as, for instance, the last glimpse of Mina in fetal position.

Dugowson is excellently helped by the six players of her two leading roles. The four children who play the girls, first at age five and then at ten, have charm, especially the bespectacled Mina, who suggests a J. D. Salinger child. But the real weight, of course, falls to the adults. Romane Bohringer, who had the title role in *The Accompanist* in 1992, is Mina, and she proves again that she is one kind of invaluable film player: she convinces us of emotional storms and peaks more with inner truth than outer sign (the kind of actress that Isabelle Huppert would like to be). Elsa Zylberstein, the Ethel, is more traditional, and finely so: she expresses more than she conceals, but always with color and truth. Bohringer's and Zylberstein's approaches to acting fit the two women they are playing, so Dugowson has cast her film well.

***Maborosi*, Hirokazu Kore-eda, 1995 (*The New Republic*, 7 October 1996)**

The art of film is not advanced by arty films. A Japanese film called *Maborosi* runs the risk of artiness with its very opening shots; but it never slips over the edge. One factor that safeguards it from preciousness, that keeps it a work of art, is that the director, Hirokazu Kore-eda, knows exactly the danger he is in and why he is facing it.

Kore-eda, now thirty-three, has made several documentaries, but this is his first feature. Yoshihisa Ogita adapted the screenplay from a novel by the well-known Teru Miyamoto. A young wife lives with her husband and infant son in a small apartment in Osaka. Happily, she thinks. One day her husband commits suicide. She doesn't understand why. The mystery haunts her. In the course of time she marries again, a man who lives in a fishing village. Her life seems to have resettled until she goes back to Osaka for a visit, and the mystery of her first husband's death envelops her again, even after she returns to her new home. She is now almost immobilized with incomprehension. Her present husband tells her that his fisherman father once spoke of the existence of a "maborosi," an *ignis fatuus* that could lead men to destruction. This really explains nothing; still, the impossibility of explaining everything in life is apparently the film's theme.

The story is slender, but Kore-eda uses it merely as an armature for mood pieces, much as nineteenth-century composers used libretti as occasions for arias and duets and choruses and so on. In *Maborosi* the "arias" are visual—collaborations between the director and his wonderful cinematographer Masao Nakabori. I haven't seen such exquisite work in a Japanese film since the heyday of the great Kazuo Miyagawa, the cinematographer of *Rashomon* (1950) and *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954) and *The Ballad of Orin* (1977).

Nakabori has no interest in the gorgeous. He concentrates on the

articulation of place through light, often set in horizontal planes, making the frame seem very delicately striated. Always the color scheme is gentle. And always, as Kore-eda clearly desires, the elements in any shot are minimal. Nakabori underscores a contrast that others have used: the difference between the patent geometry of Japanese interiors—the explicit rectangles of windows and bare walls—and the curve and flow of human bodies. But there is no moment in *Maborosi* when we are not rewarded simply by looking.

Toward the end the young woman is sitting in a small doorless shack, a bus stop on a country road. It's a medium long shot. The interior of the shack is dark, and it takes a moment before we see her within. The composition—the small shack, the large vistas behind it, the patch of darkness in the doorway that gradually reveals the woman—is exquisite.

Kore-eda works mostly in long shots, sometimes quite long. He rarely moves the camera. With Nakabori, he presents a gallery of visual meditations on the situations in which the young woman finds herself. His compositions neither illustrate nor dramatize: they transmute.

In any traditional view, there is no acting in the film. Most of the time the actors are used almost as balletic figures, slow-moving, in a terrain that itself seems concerned with their concerns. In a sense Kore-eda is a revolutionary director, not with blare and pyrotechnics but with the revision of our expectations. He asks us to look for rewards quite different from those of most other films, even very fine ones. And, quietly, he gratifies.

***Manny & Lo*, Lisa Krueger, 1996 (*The New Republic*, 12 August 1996)**

In this swollen summer season, when *Independence Day* (1996) has sucked in another million dollars since you began reading this article, it's pleasant to come across an engaging small-scale film. *Manny & Lo* is a low-budget first feature by a woman about women; and it shows talent.

The first zing of interest in *Manny & Lo* came from something that doesn't often register, the names of the producers. Dean Silvers and Marlen Hecht were involved in the production of David O. Russell's two films, *Spanking the Monkey* (1994) and *Flirting with Disaster* (1996), so clearly they have an eye for new talent. That eye has worked again. This new writer-director, Lisa Krueger, took on a delicate, therefore difficult job, but it's the kind of project that would occur only to someone with a good chance of accomplishing it, which she has done.

Manny and Lo are sisters, eleven and sixteen. Both of them have fled from (different) foster homes in order to be together and to be free. They have stolen a car, which Lo drives. They live on the road, stealing food and gas. Manny is quiet, perceptive, shrewd, yet without that precocious knowingness about sex that is so often dumped on film children these days. Lo is bossy, profane, insecure, and pregnant.

After they have followed their vagabond lives for a while, breaking into empty houses for shelter and lifting food from supermarkets, plus a bit of sex for Lo, Manny insists that they must face a fact they've been avoiding: Lo's approaching baby. They break into the well-furnished country home of some city type and camp there. They then kidnap Elaine, a woman in her forties who works in a maternity shop in a nearby town. Elaine has indeed been a nurse. The sisters

shackle her ankles so that she can't run away, and they depend on her for advice.

Elaine is a steep contrast to the girls. Her kidnapping will be noticed, she says proudly, because she is the coffee chairman of her church group; and her code of behavior does right by coffee chairmen everywhere—punctilious, ethically aphoristic, unafraid. Her propriety as she hobbles around the house in her shackles is exemplary, funny, and, of course, symbolic.

Developments, as they tend to do, develop further. After some to-ing and fro-ing, including their flight from the house because the owner has discovered them, Lo finally has her baby by the side of a stream, with Elaine assisting. (The tidily achieved birth is the script's one suppositious touch.)

The film opens and closes with shots of a stream running simple and free. That's how the sisters would like to live. Those who remember the lovely 1987 film made from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* will recall that it ends with two young sisters hitting the road with their aunt. In an abstract sense, *Manny & Lo* is the sequel. Freedom, in our world, is not free: it must be bought with considerable danger and, quite possibly, a bit of crime. *Manny & Lo*, for all its verism, is a romance that quietly acknowledges the impossibilities of romance.

John Lurie's jazz score helps—spiky, prodding. As Elaine, Mary Kay Place, veteran of *The Big Chill* (1983) and many other films and TV shows, has a witty power of concentration on the disproportionate, staunchly defending petty-bourgeois etiquette in the midst of chaos. Aleksa Palladino gives Lo a bravado to which she clings like a scared swimmer to a log. But the key performance comes from Manny—Scarlett Johansson, who has been acting since the age of eight Off-Broadway and in television and films. She has a lovely core of serenity and concern. It's easy to teach bright children to mimic, but Krueger has evoked a faculty of truth in Johansson. I hope we'll see more of her translucent face.

Krueger herself has had film education in California and France, has worked with European directors, and has been a fellow at Sundance, where she had advice on the making of this film from several professionals. Her advisers have wisely not interfered with the reticent daring of *Manny & Lo*, its seeming casualness and spontaneity. The film itself is to the film world what the two sisters are to society.

***Walking and Talking*, Nicole Holofcener, 1996 (*The New Republic*, 12 August 1996)**

Walking and Talking, written and directed by Nicole Holofcener, is, yes, another Generation X film, but it's at least partially redeemed by the hyper-realistic acting of the two leading women. (It also has a helpful small resemblance, in tone and humor, to the English film *Antonia and Jane* [1991].) Like the recent *Manny & Lo*, *Walking and Talking* is a low-budget first feature by a woman about women; and it also shows talent.

We glimpse Laura and Amelia first as early teenaged friends, commenting on the grossness of the pictures in a sex manual. Then, when they're around thirty in New York, we see them contending with the grossness and non-grossness of sex itself. They are still extremely close. Laura is a therapist about to marry. Amelia is in an office job, is seeing a therapist, and is not about to marry.

Most of the film is concerned with the sexual adventures and

misadventures of the pair, even the betrothed one. Amelia gets tangled briefly with a video-store clerk, who is really a writer. ("Really" something else is typical: Laura meets a waiter who is really an actor.) The clerk episode explodes because of an answering machine bungle by Laura. Laura's engagement hits a rock because of a mole on her fiancé's chest. (I won't explain.) The overall atmosphere of the picture is that of waiting—waiting, not searching—for some point and purpose in life, even for the marrying couple.

Holofcener, who studied film at Columbia and has directed shorts, gets some sprightliness into her writing but not much difference in characterization between the two women. Seemingly, either woman could step into the other's life without much trouble, and this aspect is not sufficiently dramatized to make it the point of the film. Yet the opening and close of the picture underscore that, whatever else may happen with them, their sisterly love, their near-symbiosis, is their refuge.

Some of the dialogue seems improvised; still, what makes even the most banal lines shine a bit is the acting of the two women, Anne Heche (Laura) and Catherine Keener (Amelia). Every utterance, every response, gets a décor of facial play—lightning-swift flickers of repressed statements, half-thoughts, regrets, secrets. Their faces become the screens of mental X-ray machines. It's an almost microscopic style of acting that was developed in TV, probably because the writing there is usually so bad that the actors or directors brought forth this style to give the dialogue some non-verbal texture. It's as if the actor were trying to express facially the stage directions that precede or follow the line in order to enrich it.

This fine-spun style could easily become mere mugging and even if not, could become a bit wearing. But Holofcener and Heche and Keener have used it amusingly here, sometimes even touchingly. It's the chief interest in the film.

***The Daytrippers*, Greg Mottola, 1996 (*The New Republic*, 10 March 1997)**

A man named Oliver Edwards appears a couple of times in Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*. At one point Edwards says he knows that Johnson is a philosopher and adds: "I have tried too in my time to be a philosopher, but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in." Taking Edwards' terms as given, I, too, try to be a philosopher about current American film; but for me, too, cheerfulness keeps breaking in.

Just look at these films by new American directors in the last year (1996): *Flirting with Disaster*, *Manny & Lo*, *Walking and Talking*, *Sling Blade*. Some real cheer there. And now there's still another ray of light, *The Daytrippers*. Greg Mottola, who wrote and directed, is bright, funny, seemingly casual. His first film has some of the larky yet perceptive quality of the French New Wave.

His subject is familiar, as is the device by which it's introduced, yet their very familiarity gives Mottola the chance to flirt and dance with them. A young suburban wife has a husband who works in a Manhattan publishing house. One day she discovers accidentally a passionate note from a lover, apparently to her husband. ("Oh Lord," we think. "Again?") She does something unpredictable. Instead of carrying on one way or another, she takes the note to her parents, who live nearby with her unmarried younger sister. Sister's boyfriend is also present. All four try to reassure her: the note is misleading, it's someone else's note, etc.

But all five of them pile into the parents' clunky car and drive into Manhattan to see the husband and sort the matter out. The familial expedition is a novelty in this situation—and promises amusement.

Of course it strains belief a bit, but that's one of Mottola's chief modes. He gets fun out of unlikely actions plunked into the middle of veristic procedure. He keeps up that contrast between realism and caprice all during the film: a slightly bizarre call at the publishing office where they learn that the husband is out; Mom's fainting spell in the street that leads to lunch in a stranger's apartment; the young wife's offer of help to a woman loading her car that leads somewhere else; and so on. The family's daylong search for the facts behind the note leads to a discovery that will no longer be a shock to us but nonetheless shocks them. And at the end Mottola again upsets neatness by leaving matters unsettled, like an unresolved open chord.

After the freehand esprit, character is Mottola's main concern. The only two people who don't deepen in the course of the day are Ma and Pa—stock lower-middle-class types who are played quite conventionally by Anne Meara and Pat McNamara. The young wife, who sees further into her marriage and herself, is done pleasantly by Hope Davis. Stanley Tucci, as her husband, is smooth but explodes when explosion is needed. Parker Posey is very credibly quirky as Davis's sister, and Liev Schreiber strikes all the right witty-sad notes as her boyfriend. Campbell Scott is more interesting than usual as a novelist on the loose, and Marcia Gay Harden slashes in a mod cartoon as a lovelorn woman at a party.

Mottola's dialogue proves—right from the start as Tucci and Davis drive home after dinner at her parents' house—that he has a fresh view of the diurnal, which means that he takes his diction from life, not from previous scripts. His directing, if not extraordinary, is straightforward, clean. The general tone of the picture, in the shapes of scenes as well as their contents, might be called "Seinfeld"-cool. All the younger characters—the characters, not the people who play them—have roles in today's urban society and are obsessed with a fear of letting their roles drag, of becoming square. The only times they abandon their roles are when something drastic cracks them open. Mottola doesn't merely surf along on these attitudes; he empathizes and comments.

Anyway, cheerfulness breaks in—for a while, at least.

INTERLUDE

"Film Diary, 1961" (*Film Quarterly*, Winter 1961-62)

The best picture I have seen so far this year (as of October 15, 1961) is *L'Avventura* (1960), in which Michelangelo Antonioni moves toward a kind of drama possible only in film: poetic immersion in character instead of conflict of character. Almost as if to rebut it, Vittorio De Sica's *Two Women* (1960) flowers out of the orthodox theatrical: an inconclusive but rich, flavorful film with an appropriately Mediterranean performance by the long-underrated Sophia Loren. *La Dolce Vita* (1960) demonstrated two things: (1) Federico Fellini's stunning virtuosity; (2) *I Vitelloni* (1953) is still the one Fellini film that is not in some way distorted to display that virtuosity. Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960) may be a happy accident, but it certainly is happy—if that is the right word for a film that so perfectly matches method with a theme of dispassionate immorality. More Godard must be seen before one can be quite sure about him. But one can be sure about Philippe de Broca's talent. *The Love Game* (1960) and *The Joker* (1960) prove that he has inherited a good deal of René Clair's ability to look at stern realities with an unflinching comic eye.

Just when many of us thought that we had had enough of Britain's belated social realism, along came Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960); and now we *have* had enough, unless further examples are as beautifully made as this film. Guy Green's *The Mark* (1961) and Ralph Thomas's *No Love for Johnnie* (1961) dealt interestingly with psycho-sexual and politico-sexual subjects, and *The Bridge* (1959) revealed Bernhard Wicki's clean storytelling skill.

A Cold Wind in August (1961) was surprisingly genuine, thanks to Alexander Singer's direction and Lola Albright's performance. *The Hustler* (1961), a somewhat vacuous script, was forcefully played by Paul Newman and incisively directed by Robert Rossen. *West Side Story* (1961), despite its lame last third, was my favorite American film of the year and the best film musical I can remember. Not to discount Robert Wise—*viva* Jerome Robbins! I hope I may be spared one more line to help deflate, if possible, Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), a film remarkable in that it manages to be simultaneously gaseous and ponderous.

"Film Diary, 1961-62" (*Film Quarterly*, Spring 1962)

The best film I saw in the last quarter (October 15, 1961-January 31, 1962) is one of the best films I have ever seen—Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Night* (1961). Several viewings make me think that the mid-twentieth century anarchy of art, accelerated by the world's transition from history to question-mark, may be resolved to some degree by this artist; that in the as-yet infantile art of the film he may be finding avenues not possible in ancient arts; that the texture of a good man's despair may in itself be a source of hope. Additionally, I admire this film's gently ruthless truth about the relations of men and women.

Celebrated directors stud the quarter. Akira Kurosawa had three belated American premieres, all partially disappointing: *Throne of Blood* (after *Macbeth*, 1957), stunningly done but emotionally remote; *The Hidden Fortress* (condensed, 1958), superb filmmaking without much content; *The Lower Depths* (1957), excellently acted but immobile and tedious. Luis Buñuel, a director whom I would like to be able to dismiss but certainly cannot, produced *Viridiana* (1961), another of his exercises in cruelty and moral revolt, always watchable but freighted with

sophomoric symbolism. (The difference between Buñuel and Antonioni is the difference between exhibitionistic perversity profound pessimism.) The Argentinian Leopoldo Torre Nilsson was represented in New York privately (Cinema 16) by *The Fall* (1959), a moderately interesting exploration of children's amorality, and publicly by *Summer Skin* (1961), a minor ripple from the New Wave. To me, he is a talented director from whom little can be expected.

André Cayatte, a fine filmmaker as such, showed in *Tomorrow Is My Turn* (1960) that he needs guidance with his scripts to keep them focused and integrated. Jean Cocteau's *Testament of Orpheus* (1960) contained the same mixture we have seen before in the work of this artist—two parts pose to one part poetry. Philippe de Broca's *Five-Day Lover* (1961), although too conventionally "French" in theme and conclusion, was delightfully directed and played.

Among American films, which included Stanley Kramer's superficial *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), the Lumet-lamed *View from the Bridge* (1962), and the ridiculous *Too Late Blues* (1961) from John Cassavetes, only Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three* (1961)—despite its occasional straining for laughs—was the work of a capable man making the film of which he is capable.

"Film Diary, 1962" (*Film Quarterly*, Summer 1962)

The three outstanding films of the quarter ending April 30, 1962, were all of extraordinary quality, all finally unsatisfactory. *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) contained, as usual, many brilliant Bergman promises, fewer fulfillments. At the start of a film by Ingmar Bergman, I always feel I am on the edge of a large experience; at the end I sit telling the rosary of its virtues, trying to understand its shortcomings. Here the excellent "chamber" playing of Gunnar Björnstrand, Max von Sydow, and Harriet Andersson; the exquisite and exquisitely apt cinematography; the delicately rigorous editing—all seemed worthier of a more cogent script. From Bergman screenplays I sometimes get the "*New Yorker* short story" feeling: namely, "only you lesser clods would ask that this be organically and thematically clear."

François Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* (1962) is the work of a man with imagination, spirit, and (as yet) no style, bursting at us with everything he knows, still unused to the fact that he *is* a director, *has* talent, and can just calm down now and make films. The pre-war selection has Colette-like charm, the second part twists off into a neurotic Strindbergian conclusion, neither convincingly prepared nor convincingly abrupt and unprepared—simply disconnected. About Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) too much has already been written; I note here only that it is a generally amusing artistic game.

A Taste of Honey (1961) was insecurely directed by Tony Richardson but contained more of merit than one expects from him; at least he evoked a moving performance from an Albert Finney-type female named Rita Tushingham. Satyajit Ray's *Devi* (*The Goddess*, 1960) would be moderately interesting if condensed by a third; the rub between old and new India has been better dramatized by him before and doubtless will be again. Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Mother Joan of the Angels* (1961) also needed someone less in love with each shot to edit it, but this medieval tale contains some beautiful balletic shots of a group of possessed nuns.

Among American films, the fresh family scenes of John Frankenheimer's *All Fall Down* (1962) almost compensated for the trite unsexiness of the sex episodes. Roger Corman's *The Intruder* (1962) was a contrived and essentially inutile film about Southern racism but had some good filmmaking in it and some chilling location shots.

As for Jean Dasque's delightful twelve-minute *Play Ball* (1960), I'm glad that limited space keeps me from succumbing to clichés about French comic invention and pastry-puff dexterity.

"Film Diary, 1962" (*Film Quarterly*, Autumn 1962)

The three months ending July 31, 1962, produced some American films of interest. Chief among these was *Lolita* (1962), whose screenplay Vladimir Nabokov seduced out of his own novel. The savage satire, the poetic horror, the lyric sexuality were all diminished in the name of practicality. What was left—a rather sodden study of a sad middle-aged fumbler—was well performed by James Mason, Shelley Winters, Peter Sellers, and Sue Lyon, a postgraduate nymphet. Stanley Kubrick's direction had flashes of fire and hate but not enough—not nearly the imagination and wit that (for examples) de Broca or Godard or Truffaut might have brought to it. From beginning to end this film was boxed for delivery to the Production Code seal office and the Legion of Decency. Those who think that the film should not be judged against the novel cannot argue away the fact that the producers are relying heavily on the novel's reputation to attract audiences. If so, why is comparison not appropriate? And must we always concede that to judge a novelized film on its own merits means to assume that films are a lesser, more restricted form than novels?

Ernest Hemingway's quintessence consisted of writing realistically about romantic people and situations. Martin Ritt's *Hemingway's Adventures as a Young Man* (1962), from A. E. Hotchner's screenplay, captured some of the sense of encounter between a young man and a world of "unforgettable characters." The film suffered from softness of will and from Susan Strasberg; and Richard Beymer, as the hero, proved that an odyssey does not require an absolutely convincing Odysseus if the people he meets are convincing.

Lonely Are the Brave (1962), Kirk Douglas's tolerable modern Western, also suffered from lack of resolution and anxiety to please; but it contained some mordant moments.

A Kind of Loving (1962), with which John Schlesinger makes a welcome feature début, is one more of the English "social realies." Its trite story is wedded to a setting that is essentially irrelevant, but Alan Bates's performance as the hero, built on pungent dialogue by Willis Hall and Keith Waterhouse, is touching.

The best is saved for last. *The Island* (a.k.a. *The Naked Island*, 1960), written and directed by Kaneto Shindo, is a film without dialogue about a farmer, his wife, and two small sons who scratch out their living on a tiny island on Japan's Inland Sea. The veracity of every moment in the film, as performed by accomplished actors, is a much-needed rebuke to the sophistries of neorealism. More importantly, the film is a pure statement of love, of a cosmos realized and sustained by interdependence, of a happiness too simple for most of us to aspire towards.

"Film Diary, 1962" (*Film Quarterly*, Winter 1962-63)

The quarter ending October 31, 1962, brought a new Antonioni film, than which a quarter can do no more. *Eclipse* (1962) completes the trilogy begun by *L'Avventura* (1960) and *The Night* (1961), and this world ends neither with a bang nor a whimper but in poignantly suspended animation. Michelangelo Antonioni's story is of a Roman girl ending one love and beginning another, which too she knows will end; it progresses with that ambience of stillness—like watching one's self from within one's own mind—that is this artist's particular and haunting note. Because the girl is less individualized than his earlier protagonists, is more of a personified contemporary symbol, the film is less moving than the first two; but Antonioni's splaying open of an environment and his frenzied ballet of the Roman stock exchange are matters possible only to a master.

Among American films, *The Connection* (1961), now licensed for New York exhibition, is likely to become the Dred Scott of the cinema, more famous as a case than for itself. The sophomoric naturalism of the script, the air of import (though the cupboard is bare) are aggravated by Jack Gelber's nagging attempts to take us past artistic reality to "real" reality. Shirley Clarke is one of the younger Americans trying to rehabilitate our film world, but her direction here, despite some telling touches, tends to be as emptily portentous as the script.

Billy Budd (1962) seems ideal material for a film if two problems can be solved: the casting of Billy so that he is too good and yet true; Terence Stamp does not quite succeed in the former role, and Peter Ustinov is grotesquely inadequate in the latter. Ustinov's direction, clumsy enough in a trifle like his own *Romanoff and Juliet* (1961), would be fatal here if there were much life to start with.

Long Day's Journey into Night (1962) would have been better as an long-playing phonograph record than the LP film that it is. Now we have to watch the non-moving pictures while we listen, and none of Sidney Lumet's limited but insistent wiles can make them live on the screen. However, Jason Robards is fine as the son and Ralph Richardson sustains the father; but the gifted Katharine Hepburn is miscast as the mother and Dean Stockwell is miscast vocationally.

To conclude, another master's work: *Yojimbo* (1961). This seems as if Akira Kurosawa had decided to take the "lone-gun" Western and not only transpose it to nineteenth-century Japan but amplify the melodrama into drama, the Good Guy into a hero. With a weathered-oak-and-lightning performance by Toshiro Mifune that further displays his credible virtuosity, the result evokes the balcony thrills of childhood together with a high degree of aesthetic satisfaction.

"Film Diary, 1963" (*Film Quarterly*, Spring 1963)

The quarter ending January 31, 1963 brought an embarrassment of richly discussable films. *David and Lisa* (1962) is the best American low-budget production I can remember and a good picture it its own right. It is somewhat constricted and occasionally clumsy, and its ending is mechanical; but, in general, Frank Perry's direction and Eleanor Perry's script generate compassion and concern. Keir Dullea gives a flaring performance as a compulsive neurotic.

The two most important films of the quarter are its biggest disappointments—and for related reasons. Orson Welles's *The Trial* (1962) contains scenes as coruscatingly brilliant as any he has ever done; but, wounded by Anthony Perkins' performance as K., the film is killed by its desertion of Kafka's theme. In *The Elusive Corporal* (1962) Jean Renoir deals again with French prisoners in Germany—this time in a later war. Jean-Pierre Cassel invests the leading role with lightness, tenderness, and poetry of motion, and many of the scenes are marvelously made, but this film, too, lacks thematic consequence. It is finally unsatisfying, a series of varyingly successful skits and sketches.

Two more "big" films. In *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) Robert Mulligan's direction (particularly of the children) triumphs gently over Gregory Peck's performance and, almost, over the sentimentalities of Harper Lee's 1960 novel. *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) is the most powerfully photographed color film I know—photography that is not merely decoration but whose beauty is integral to the film. David Lean is, for the most part, in superb command of both the vast action shots and the subjective scenes. Peter O'Toole makes Lawrence a fascinating man, and all the cast, except José Ferrer, are excellent. Robert Bolt's script is too long for what it treats (Lawrence's Arabian career) and does not treat enough (his post-Arabian career); yet much of the dialogue is so good as to give pleasure in itself besides advancing character and story.

Some failures. Akira Kurosawa's contemporary *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960) is disappointingly heavy and vacuous, interesting only in further displaying the range of the magnificent Toshiro Mifune. Michael Cacoyannis's *Electra* (1962), despite some intelligence, some pretty pictures, and Irene Papas's gifted performance, is essentially misconceived. The classic Greek theater does not function in the film form. Serge Bourgignon's first film *Sundays and Cybele* (1962) is the most overpraised picture in years. A lot of elements—plainly marked "Poetic"—have been selected and lined up but have not been fused or vitalized. We know what we are supposed to feel but, except for some moments in young Patricia Gozzi's extraordinary performance, we don't feel it.

Some successes. Two unpretentious, solid Italian films: Luigi Comencini's *Everybody Go Home!* (1960), a tart and candid examination of Italian attitudes in 1943 after the Badoglio surrender, with Alberto Sordi superb as a pragmatic lieutenant; and Dino Risi's *Love and Larceny* (1960), with Vittorio Gassman as a chameleon con man, a comedy funnier, though less ambitious, than Pietro Germi's *Divorce Italian Style* (1961). Finally, the best postwar Russian film I have seen: Josef Heifetz's *Lady with the Dog* (1959)—Chekhov completely comprehended and affectingly rendered.

"Film Diary, 1963" (*Film Quarterly*, Summer 1963)

The quarter ending April 30, 1963, brought a new Bergman, an old Antonioni, a new and old Kurosawa. *Winter Light* (1963), a further inquiry by Ingmar Bergman into the present-day viability of religion, depicts the dilemma of a spiritually bankrupt clergyman. The tone is set by the title: thin sun, brightness without heat. The film is made with a marvelous economy and a sureness that are in themselves more affecting than the central thesis, which is stated, not fully

dramatized. The residual effect is literary, an idea worked out on paper, and then filmed, rather than a fulfillment in film.

Dan Talbot continues his laudable work in importing neglected films for his New Yorker Theater. He must be thanked for the chance to see Michelangelo Antonioni's *Le Amiche* (1955), which preceded the trilogy and is much more than a rough draft for it. In its seriousness and dexterity, the film would be a peak for many a director; in sheer beauty and individualized style, however, it is not Antonioni's full flowering.

Talbot also brought us Akira Kurosawa's uncut, two-and-three-quarter-hour modern version of *The Idiot* (1951). Equal thanks but not equal praise. It is hard to believe that this mere series of illustrated scenes from a novel was made after *Rashomon* (1950). Kurosawa's recent *Sanjuro* (1962), a sequel to *Yojimbo* (1961), is rich in skill, poor in content: an action picture with even less texture than the first chapter of the itinerant samurai's adventures. Not a frame of film in it can be faulted, not a gesture of Toshiro Mifune's that is ineffective, but I hope that soon this director and star will again bite off at least as much as they can chew.

Other foreign films: Lindsay Anderson's first feature, *This Sporting Life* (1963), has sequences of fierce character collision like cars smashing headlong, with fine performances by Richard Harris and Rachel Roberts; but the script is unsteady, and Anderson's control ranges from the confident to the somewhat confused. Parts are so good that they make the weaker sections seem worse. Joan Littlewood's *Sparrows Can't Sing* (1963) is a chipper cockney folk-comedy, whose vital material is somewhat debilitated by the chromium-plated "musical" feel of the film. Satyajit Ray's *Two Daughters* (1961), based on two Rabindranath Tagore stories, is delicate, indigenous, finally tedious; honesty and (to us) novel settings cannot entirely redeem predictable material.

American films: *Hud* (1963), about contemporary Texas ranch life, is easily the best of the quarter. Paul Newman's and Patricia Neal's performances, Martin Ritt's lithe, evocative direction are of high quality; the dialogue by Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, Jr., is quick and salty. But the roots of the Hud character's solipsism are not convincingly drawn. The result is a well-made structure on a flimsy foundation; fundamentally, the picture seems pointless. Joseph Strick's *The Balcony* (1963), from Genet's play, is like a neat cardboard cut-out imposed on a large, less tidy canvas, but it has some graphic images and Lee Grant's subtle performance. Minimally, one can be glad that it was made—and in this country. Which is more than can be said of Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963).

"Film Diary, 1963" (*Film Quarterly*, Autumn 1963)

Outstanding in the quarter ending July 31, 1963, were two contrasting Italian films. Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963) is an example of art so excellently made that it not only seems better than it is, in a sense it is better than it seems. One is continually delighted by its cinematic bravura; moved, reproved, and tickled by nuance and insight; constantly aware that the entertainment is being provided by sensibility and fabulous talent. Later, one sees that its content, its point, is slight; then, still later, one sees that the execution was so miraculous that the thematic shortcoming looms small. Ermanno Olmi's *The Sound of Trumpets* (a fairly free translation of *Il Posto* [1961]) is a simple sad poem about flickering humanism in

a poured-concrete world—all the sadder for being the director's protest and not the characters'. *8½* is a coruscatingly orchestrated piece, with everything from fiddles to glockenspiel and theremin. Olmi's film is a small chamber work, woodwinds and strings, some pertinent variations on a familiar theme.

William Golding's 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies* is an apt subject for a film and may some day be made into a good one. Peter Brook's 1963 attempt fails because of the obtrusion of theory—a vaguely neorealistic, "non-acted" approach—which makes the film sag in the internals of its scenes like an amateur play and which vitiates the terror. It seems to have been edited like mad in an effort to make up for the fact that what happens between one cut and another is generally limp. The studio sound fights the location photography, and Raymond Leppard's music wants to tug heartstrings but cannot even grasp them.

After one notes the obvious influences on Roman Polanski's *Knife in the Water* (1962), it remains a considerable achievement, overlong but perceptive and subtle and technically adroit. It has only the three characters of its triangle, but it is principally the husband's drama and treats him with unsparing understanding.

Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960) was an extraordinary film that, as happens from time to time, might have been better than its direction. This suspicion is partly confirmed by *My Life to Live* (1962), a lengthy collection of arty attitudinizings insisting on their importance, with the insistent note getting shriller as the film becomes more vacuous.

Some American films. *The Condemned of Altona* (1962): Jean-Paul Sartre, the man-sized dramatist, shrunk to the scale of scriptwriter Abby Mann, an artistic, intellectual, and moral Lilliputian. *All the Way Home* (1963): an irresistible child (Michael Kearney), a good actress giving a fair performance (Jean Simmons), Robert Preston doing the Music Man without music; the warm sentimental effects lost because of the sentimentality with which the differences between the married pair have been excised. *Cleopatra* (1963): Rex Harrison's consummate skill, Richard Burton's sporadically effective melancholia, Joseph L. Mankiewicz's rhinestone dialogue. Like Elizabeth Taylor, the film is occasionally impressive spectacle, but it is really two stories and, like Miss Taylor, overexposes its cleavage.

"Film Diary, 1963" (*Film Quarterly*, Winter 1963-64)

New York's first Film Festival at Lincoln Center was highly interesting because of the audience, and because of three features and the chance to see a display of international shorts. The audience, if we discount the fringe that would flock to soup-can sculpture if they thought it would demonstrate special sensitivities, showed an enthusiasm (both pro and con) that proved again the unique importance of the cinema today. The three outstanding features were Roman Polanski's *Knife in the Water* (1962), Ermanno Olmi's *The Fiancés* (1963), and Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963). Outstanding shorts were those by the Czechs Václav Bedřich (*Chlapíci* [1963]) and Jiří Brdečka (*The Frozen Logger* [1963]), the Italian Bruno Bozzetto (*Mr. Rossi Goes Skiing* [1963]), the Englishman George Dunning (*The Apple* [1963]), and the American Stan Vanderbeek (*Breathdeath* [1963]).

Some adverse comments. First, it was senseless for the Museum of Modern Art to run a concurrent series; both programs simply could not be encompassed. Second, the *cinéma-vérité* documentary by Richard Leacock and Robert Drew (*Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* [1963]) seemed to me corruptive in its assumptions that these matters of presidential and legal activity were public property. Of course the individuals concerned had assented. Of course the film was not boring. It would not be boring if a camera were secreted in the president's bedroom, but it would not be much more intrusive, either. (The fake democratic-public interest argument could run: "The White House belongs to the country and the people have a right to know what happens in it.")

As for specific pictures at the New York Film Festival, I will note only that the status of *cinéma vérité* was not enhanced by a French feature (*The Trial of Joan of Arc* [1962], by Robert Bresson); that an imitation of Antonioni (*The Sea* [1962], by Giuseppe Patroni Griffi) proves that the adolescent mind thinks that the way to respond to commercialism is to wallow in artiness; that all the films (excepting Olmi's) were too long. Richard Roud's selection of features was extremely questionable. One realizes that his choice was limited; presumably he could not have every film he would have liked. But this does not excuse (to particularize just once) the ludicrous Jean-Pierre Melville trash (*Magnet of Doom* [1963]) and several others. Moreover, Roud's program notes, soggy with the worst film-journal jargon, lavished such indiscriminate praise on all the films that the program became the *cinéaste* equivalent of the Madison Avenue hard sell.

Brief notes on three recent pictures. *Tom Jones* (1963), easily the film most overrated by New York reviewers in my lifetime, is a sporadically amusing, generally well-acted, superbly photographed jumble. Tony Richardson, a director without a style, grabs at everything from Turpin to Truffaut, seemingly in fear of boring his audience with an eighteenth-century story. *Billy Liar* (1963), scripted by Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall from the former's 1959 novel, is bitterly funny for the most part, and shows increased self-confidence on the part of the gifted John Schlesinger. Tom Courtenay, imaginatively supple enough, lacks the sex and bottled-up steam that Albert Finney must have brought to the 1960 stage production. Also, the role of the "free" girl is cloudy, and in it Julie Christie gets an almost MGM star build-up of smiley close-ups. *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963), a film no less inflated than its title, shows what a man (Stanley Kramer) who doesn't understand seriousness can do when he turns to lightness. Dozens of comedians, three hours and forty minutes of Cinerama slapstick, and nothing like equivalent laughs. I'll remember only thirty or forty seconds of Buster Keaton.

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, by Thomas Schatz (*The New Republic*, 27 February 1989)**

The Hollywood studio system, which began around 1920 and flourished from around 1930 through the 1950s, is unique in Western culture. It has descendants of a sort but no proximate forebears. Basically the studio system can be seen as an exponent of the familiar Marx-Engels dictum on the relation of a society's art to its modes of production:

> Raphael as much as any artist was determined by . . . the organization of society and division of labor in his locality, and, finally, by the division of labor in all the countries with which his locality had intercourse. . . . In Paris, the great demand for vaudevilles and novels brought about the organization of work for their production. (*The German Ideology*, 1846)

But neither sixteenth-century Rome nor nineteenth-century Paris had burst with a demand for their arts equivalent to America's demand for films—followed by the world's demand for American films—in the first half of the twentieth century. The difference in degree ordained an absolute difference in kind. No cultural phenomenon on record ranks in size and effect with Hollywood.

Much has been made of the truth that, in an era of accelerating technology, film was the first art—and is still the best art—to employ technology for

humanistic ends. What is equally true is that the technology that made the art possible also made it globally available. Thus the very nature of the art itself produced the means to satisfy the global appetite for it.

Naturally Hollywood has been a mother lode for historians and biographers. Studies of individuals, of individual studios, cluster on the shelves. There are even studies of studio founders as a group: *The Moguls*, by Norman Zierold (1969), and *The Movie Moguls*, by Philip French (1969), both of which deal with the fact that most of the moguls were Jewish immigrants, and the latest and fullest in this subgenre. *An Empire of Their Own*, by Neal Gabler (1988), which concentrates on that fact. Lately, overviews of the whole thirty-year explosion have increased. The two best up to now were *The Hollywood Studio System*, by Douglas Gomery (1986), which focuses on the financial histories of the studios, and a collection of essays by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson called *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985), a huge, thoughtful examination of the film styles and modes of production brought about by studio conditions. (One of the guidelines of this invaluable work is the Marx-Engels quotation cited above.) Now, as if to complete a triad, comes Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System.*

Schatz, who teaches at the University of Texas at Austin, chronicles the founding, growth, maintenance, and decline of four of the studios—and views the whole history as an adventure. Drawing largely on primary sources and using photographs liberally, he includes a good deal about financial records (*à la* Gomery) and a good deal about modes of production (*à la* Bordwell-Staiger-Thompson), but his emphasis is on the personal drama of the men involved—their vision, drive, capacity for work, greed, loyalties and betrayals, perception, blindness, and zest. Zest, as a factor of ambition, of fascination with the medium, is the dominant element in this long book.

The Genius of the System takes its title from a 1957 essay by André Bazin in which he bade the French *auteurist* critics infatuated with American cinema to "admire in it what is most admirable, i.e., not only the talent of this or that filmmaker but the genius of the system." (Schatz is so taken with this quotation that he featured it in his earlier, 1981 book, *Hollywood Genres*.) That system consisted of eight major studios, two of which were only "major minors"—Universal and Columbia—because they owned no theaters back in the days before anti-trust rulings outlawed that "integration" between production and exhibition. Schatz deals with two of the "major majors," MGM and Warner Brothers, one of the lesser group, Universal, and the most prominent of the independent producers, David O. Selznick. Schatz limited his book to those four companies because "looking at all of them in a single volume would be impossible" in detail and because eight such full histories could not be braided into "a unified narrative." In his bibliographical note he adds what may be a key factor: he chose his four companies because of the availability of primary research sources, "corporate records in archives around the country."

Schatz justifies this choice-by-research-possibilities. With each studio he gives us the view from the inside, derived from company records, ledgers, memos, letters, telegrams, personal memoirs, minutes of conferences. (And, as acknowledged, he also uses published material.) He interweaves the four accounts, trying to keep them abreast chronologically. Occasionally the four stories overlap: e.g., Irving Thalberg began at Universal, then moved to MGM; Selznick was a force at MGM before he founded his own company. Each of the

majors produced one film a week in its heyday, and the impressionistic overview of the period is of an eight-part giant well pumping away steadily for decades to slake a worldwide thirst.

Some of the earliest American film directors, Maurice Tourneur and Erich von Stroheim, for instance, began as individualists who controlled everything about their films; but as the studios waxed in process and strength, the individualists either had to conform or be smashed. Nowadays, it seems the only possibility, but it must have seemed daring then to put the manufacture of film on the same assembly-line basis that was developing in so many other fields. (Could the rise of Henry Ford have been far from pioneer Hollywood minds?) The studios firmly called film "product," and they organized departments to supply all components: writing, scene and costume design and construction, photography, casting, filmmaking itself, editing, marketing, and more. The superreality and the anti-reality—everything but reality—that were fed through film into the wide world's fantasies were as carefully engineered as the new automobiles that were altering physical lives.

Obviously more than business skill was involved. Talent was needed, even if it was only a talent for hiring talent. In some instances—Thalberg is always and rightly named as the chief example—an executive had extraordinary gifts for divining what the public wanted and for fashioning it out of inchoate material. That is the recurrent argument of Schatz's book: initially and finally, a film was made by the men in charge of the picture and of the studio. (Schatz notes only one important woman on the production side—Kay Brown, Selznick's canny story editor.)

This producer-power is a point often ignored. The producers in their serried ranks—from the Jack L. Warners at the very top down through the unit producers and executive producers or whatever their banana-republic titles were and all the way up again—were the real determiners of a film's existence. The directors did what they could, and some of them distinguished themselves; but almost none of them had the authority to start or finish a film. (Schatz tells us how such eminences as Huston and Hitchcock walked away from pictures after shooting them and left the editing in executives' hands.) Writers worked in squads that were dispatched to a film script at various stages of production the way a military commander sends squads until he captures a position. (Former journalists, says Schatz, were of more use to the studio than novelists and playwrights because journalists were more utilitarian, more willing to treat the business as a business.) No matter what the visible talents, everything that was on the screen was there, just the way it was there, because of men who were not on the screen.

Yet the studios developed "personal" characteristics because the chiefs saw the strengths and weaknesses in their own parishes. For a while, MGM specialized in lush "women's" pictures, Warner in nitty-gritty street films, Selznick in adaptations of famous novels; Universal became a not-so-little shop of horrors. These emphases were never exclusive within a studio nor were they permanent. (When the horror box office faded, Universal was revived by Deanna Durbin.) But studios thrived on knowing their markets and on having the right people on the payroll to satisfy them. Long-term contracts made the studio system possible, made genre specialization logical and easier. The non-genre picture, of which there were many, was more troublesome.

Schatz is especially vivid in his ac-counts of the making of some well-known films—*Grand Hotel* (1932), *Frankenstein* (1931), *Jezebel* (1938), and *Notorious* (1946) are only a few of them. Mining the daily records, Schatz shows us experienced yet harried men as they experimented with one approach and another, altered, expanded, discarded, argued, revised up to and after the previews. We see stupidities, vulgarities, silliness, but more often than not—or the studios would have foundered long before they did—we see keen industrial skill at work, sometimes a touch more than that. We can understand from these notes, to put the matter at its earthiest, why Thalberg rose from an annual salary of $1,250 at Universal in 1918 to $400,000 at MGM in 1926.

We get glimpses of projects that were sweated over, sometimes for years, then dropped. We see familiar pictures go through metamorphoses from the unfamiliar to the shapes we know. We read of castings that never came off: Buster Keaton as the ailing, downtrodden Kringelein in *Grand Hotel* (L. B. Mayer vetoed Keaton because of his drinking), Ronald Reagan as Rick in 1942's *Casablanca* (as soon as Hal Wallis became the picture's producer, he changed the casting). Perhaps, somewhere in the Borges land of unwritten books, those unmade films exist and are now playing.

What happened to those great humming machines of film manufacture? Why did they slow down and crumble? The first, obvious cause was the rise of television, which lavished entertainment on the public at home and charged no price except the rupture—with commercials—of the viewer's sense of pictorial continuity. Another reason, as Schatz makes clear, was the ultimate success of the federal anti-trust actions against the studios, which began in 1938 and climaxed in 1948. These judgments forced the separation of ownership of studios and theaters. That joint ownership had been manifestly unfair to independent theater owners, who got second choice of the studio offerings, often under oppressive terms; but the separation deprived the studios of the circulation of their blood, an assured flow from the heart to the extremities. Without that assured circulation, the studios suffered sluggishness and attrition—just as television arrived! Some studios still nominally exist, but mostly they are only financiers and distributors, loci for other people's films, which compete for exhibition instead of proceeding to it confidently as the last step in a great chain of being.

Schatz tells his interwoven stories in serviceable prose, though he sometimes feels compelled to be chummily casual. ("A go project"; Englishmen are Brits; Cagney's first name is always Jimmy.) He commits some egregious slights and errors. He calls *auteurism* "adolescent romanticism," which seems harsh even to an anti-*auteurist* like me. He describes Mae West as a "vaudevillian" before she came to pictures, which is inadequate. He places the Capitol Theater in New York on Times Square, which is six blocks off. And horrendously, he describes Thomas Eakins, whose work was a source of visual ideas for *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), as "a popular magazine illustrator at the turn of the century, something of a predecessor to Norman Rockwell." But Schatz keeps the energy level of the book high, a prime requisite for his complex story.

Shall we mourn the passing of the studios? It would be no more sensible than to mourn the invention of television. The real question that pursues the reader of Schatz's book and of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* is: Why ought we to care one way or the other? Aside from sociological interest and the excitement

of a gigantic enterprise, why ought those who love film be concerned about the styles and fates of factories whose methods almost completely contradict the methods by which most of the world's great films have been made?

The answer, for me, is *Libeled Lady* (1936). One answer, anyway. Of the 500 or so films a year from all Hollywood sources during that Golden Age—and I saw many of them when they were released, some of them much more recently—I estimate that about two percent are worth the time of a cultivated viewer today. My example of that one-in-fifty is not a musical with Astaire's heartstopping genius, not *Citizen Kane* (1941), not one of John Ford's best, but a 1936 MGM programmer, a farce-comedy with a routine producer, Lawrence Weingarten, and a routine director. Jack Conway. (Schatz mentions the film, but it's not in his skimpy index.) Three writers are credited, Maurine Watkins, Howard Emmett Rogers, and George Oppenheimer, but doubtless others were involved. Presumably *Libeled Lady* was concocted as a means to employ four of the studio's stars, Jean Harlow, Myrna Loy, Spencer Tracy, and William Powell. Presumably the picture was planned and worked on, right from start to end of the assembly line, as a device to help pay the studio overhead. Yet the result, right off that assembly line, is a light-fingered, clever delight.

My argument is a good deal more than the one about a million monkeys eventually typing out *Hamlet*. *Libeled Lady* is what Bazin's "genius of the system" means to me, not the *recherché* aesthetic values in run-of-the-mill pop culture but the fact that the mere assemblage of a lot of talents and a lot of ambitions is bound to produce something truly good occasionally. Besides, there is a proportional argument to be made for the studios. I know of no study that compares Hollywood's activities during the studio years with the activities of Broadway or the publication of novels during those years. Such a study would be subjective, not statistical. Still, except for a very few peaks in drama and fiction, how could any respectable study show the proportion of lastingly good plays or novels to be much higher than that of lastingly good films?

Money was always the goal in Hollywood, certainly, but something more than money-hunger flared in the first decades of American film. I once spent a few days turning the yellowed pages of the earliest film trade journals, around 1908, and although almost everything was business news—who had made what, who had bought what—heat seemed to burn up from those crumbling pages, passion about something new and momentous, bigger (as those people sensed) than any of them could foresee. That fire wasn't entirely lost in the industrialization during the next forty years. It wasn't only the cash that obsessed the Movieland mind; money can be made in other ways. Film itself absorbed most of them, day and night—the thrill of filmmaking. That's why there is something touching in Schatz's history of an industry.

***Behind the Mask of Innocence: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era*, by Kevin Brownlow, 1990 (*The New Republic*, 31 December 1990)**

History keeps changing. New research, new perceptions keep the past from being mummified, make it almost as responsive to experience as the present. This is something of a paradox in most histories, but in the history of film it's an astonishment. The remotest past of film (film itself, not the prehistory) is less than

100 years behind us, yet that past is already so obscured that new knowledge keeps altering it.

Kevin Brownlow, the English film historian, has devoted the last twenty years to brushing away some rapidly accumulated cobwebs. His latest book, *Behind the Mask of Innocence: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era* (Alfred A. Knopf, with 250 photographs), revises some widely held views of American silent films, along with views of the America that made those films. Political and cultural historians have nourished the idea of an American innocence that persisted until World War I and beyond. This idea was reflected in Edward Wagenknecht's history of silent film, *The Movies in the Age of Innocence* (1962), and it is this basic view that Brownlow now skewers. Other film historians, Lewis Jacobs, for instance, have touched on some of the matters that Brownlow raises, but he unifies the argument.

He has proceeded simply by examining available records and seeing available films, some of them thought to be unavailable. This is not a record of secret or smuggled pictures—fraternity house porn, etc. Brownlow chronicles silent pictures that were, for the most part, made by known producers for general release. The fact that these pictures have often been scanted in histories of American film possibly reveals an America not so much innocent as eager to think itself so: the Barefoot Boy Syndrome.

Brownlow's first chapter is about censorship, and he has good satirical fun with it just by collecting data. The urge to censor was bound to emerge quickly in an "innocent" country's encounter with film, especially since, by 1910, twenty-six million Americans were going to nickelodeons every week. In 1908 Mayor George B. McClellan of New York was so disturbed by the threat of the nickelodeons to morality that he closed them all down on the ground of public safety. It took four court orders to reopen them. Even so, children under sixteen had to be accompanied by an adult. Were the films smutty? Then, as now, it all depended on who was doing the defining. States set up censorship boards, and in Pennsylvania a mother could not be shown making clothes for an unborn child because "the movies are patronized by thousands of children who believe that babies are brought by the stork, and it would be criminal to undeceive them."

Brownlow then devotes ten chapters to the main themes he finds in American silent film. The first of these, of course, is sex. After dismissing "cooch reels," which were sold privately, he turns to the public pictures, notes the lurid titles that were often used on relatively staid pictures, then examines a surprising number of films that dealt with, for the day, surprisingly daring topics.

In 1916 Lillian Gish, the platonic idea of purity, made *The Children Pay*, in which she was a daughter whose life was besmirched by her parents' divorce. The subject was so hot that later the divorce was cut, and Gish was shown to be suffering because she was an orphan. In 1915 Richard Bennett (who late in life played Major Amberson in the 1942 Orson Welles film) made a picture based on Eugène Brieux's play *Damaged Goods*, which is about syphilis. That same year D. W. Griffith's company produced a version of *Ghosts*, the Ibsen play in which syphilis figures. I once saw this film; it's a long way from Ibsen, but it's grim enough. In 1917 Margaret Sanger, brave pioneer of birth control, made a documentary film called *Birth Control* and acted in it.

"White slave" films flourished in those days, the most celebrated/excoriated one being *Traffic in Souls* (1913). It was apparently a

seriously intended picture and was, says Brownlow, "the first film not taken from a novel or a play to receive a Broadway opening." This instance and the ones above are only a meager handful of the unexpected items in the sex chapter. The other chapters—on drugs, prohibition, crime, political corruption, women's suffrage, prisons, poverty, immigrants, industry—are at least equally crammed with jolts to our notions of early-film blandness. What follows are a few examples.

It's generally known that Wallace Reid, an immensely popular star, died in 1923 of drugs. It's less widely known that his widow then collaborated with the celebrated Thomas H. Ince on a picture called *Human Wreckage*, about drug addiction, and acted in it.

Poverty and the troubles thereof were a locus for a great many films of the era. "The early filmmakers, many of whom came from precisely this background [big-city poverty], believed they wielded a powerful influence for change." But some of the more striking films in this area came from a man of quite different background. In 1915 Cecil B. DeMille, who ended up as an arch-conservative, made a picture called *Kindling*—about what slums do to children—which Brownlow calls "a socialist tract." In 1926 DeMille made *The Volga Boatmen*, which Brownlow calls the one picture of the day that portrayed the Russian Revolution in a favorable light.

These concerns led inevitably to the subject of labor problems. As early as 1908 came a film called *The Molly Maguires* (though it was very differently oriented from the Martin Ritt-Walter Bernstein film of the same name in 1970). The horrifying Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, in New York, was the impetus for three films: *The Crime of Carelessness* (1912), *The Locked Door* (1915), and *The Children of Eve* (1914). The year 1926 saw *The Passaic Textile Strike*, which combined fiction, newsreel shots of the strike, and reconstruction of events (a practice with a previous history). Brownlow says, "I put off writing this book until I saw that film," and he suggests that some of the shots anticipate Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, which, though made in 1925, had not yet been shown in the United States. The director of *The Passaic Textile Strike* was long unknown but has since been revealed to be one Samuel Russak.

The making of this American film raises the matter of verism. Brownlow jogs the assumption that the use of actual locales became widespread only after World War II. Here are a very few of the many actual places used as silent film settings: Ellis Island (not always the warmly welcoming place it is now accounted), Sing Sing, a cotton mill, and a meat-packing plant—for a 1914 film of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.

Verism extended to the use of famous or infamous persons to portray themselves. Outstanding among these was Iliodor (Sergei Michailovich Trufanov), the Russian priest who had been a friend of Rasputin—then an enemy—and who had fled for his life. Iliodor played himself in *The Fall of the Romanoffs* (1917), which was co-produced by Lewis J. Selznick, father of David O.

Brownlow sometimes details plots at too great length. Sometimes personal stories, better suited to the endnotes, intrude on the historical narrative. Occasionally his language slips: a term like "instant classic" ought to be beneath him. But his book is wonderfully valuable. It enlightens; it shakes preconceptions; it adds fascinating colors to a fabric assumed to be more or less monochrome. In *American Silent Film* (1978), William K. Everson spoke of "a growing suspicion that 1913-14 may be one of the great lost frontiers of film scholarship, likely to

reveal more examples of modernity and sophistication in filmmaking than historians have ever suspected." Brownlow suspected. For those years, and for many before and after, he has opened the lost frontiers.

In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing, Walter Murch, 1995 (*The New Republic*, 15-22 July 1996)

"The foundation of film art is *editing*." That's the first line of Vsevolod Pudovkin's introduction to his *Film Technique* (1949). But he wasn't thinking of editing as it's generally practiced today: to him editing was an inseparable part of the director's function. He said further: "The material of the film director consists not of real processes happening in real space and real time, but of those pieces of celluloid on which these processes have been recorded." The key word is "director"; editing was seen as, not merely his prerogative, but his very reason for being. Today editing is the director's possible privilege: to have "final cut," or any cut at all. To Pudovkin and his contemporaries, the question did not exist.

When did the completely separate profession of film editing emerge, as distinct from editing assistant to a director? I can't find any clear historical account of it. (Doctoral students of film! A gap to be filled?) But take, as an instance, the filmography of D. W. Griffith. The first time a film editor is credited is on his last picture, *The Struggle* (1931); we can assume that previously Griffith had done all the editing himself.

It's easy to infer that, as production was stepped up in every filmmaking country, as more and more directors had to be employed who wanted to be, or who were allowed to be, only craftsmen on assembly lines, those assembly lines had also to include editors. At some point in the history of the Broadway musical, there was a cognate development. The composer stopped being a composer and became a tune writer; someone else, called the orchestrator, came in to finish the job, to convert the tunes into the music that was played in the theater. That two-man composing-team idea would have been inconceivable to a well-trained musician like (to leave Olympians out of it) Victor Herbert. The two-man directing-editing team would have been inconceivable to early filmmakers. Perhaps a cultural-historical relation exists between the rise of the professional film editor and the professional orchestrator.

None of this is to argue against the importance of the film editor. Quite the contrary. As the director became more constricted or less competent or even less interested, the editor's importance grew.

All of the above is by way of introduction to the subject of Walter Murch, film editor. Murch is hardly known outside the film world, but to many filmmakers he is a greatly respected figure—to some, a bit of a guru. His standing is built on, and rises beyond, his work as a film editor and a sound editor. Among the films for which he edited the soundtracks are *The Conversation* (1974) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979); and there's a fascinating interview with him in Vincent LoBrutto's 1994 book *Sound-on-Film*. (LoBrutto says that Murch's work "led to the beginning of a new era in film sound.") But it's as a film editor that I've been chiefly aware of Murch and have heard most about him—editing on such films as *Julia* (1977), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), and *The Godfather III* (1990). So when I saw his name on the cover of the latest issue of *Brick*, the Canadian literary journal, I

turned to his article at once.

"Blink!," as the article is called, is about film editing, and after I had raced through it, I saw the note that it had been excerpted from Murch's recent book, *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing*. I hadn't heard of it; I got a copy quickly (Silman-James Press). It consists of the revised transcript of a long lecture that Murch gave in Australia in 1988. He has added an afterword on the advantages and risks of digital editing, but the prime of the book is the distillation of Murch's experience and insight.

The nuggets are numerous. Here he is on the subject of public previews, which he thinks are "tricky." He is "extremely suspicious" of those cards that audience members fill out as they leave:

> The most helpful thing of all is simply learning how you feel when the film is being shown to 600 people who have never seen it before. Emotionally it seems like some big hand has come and grabbed you by the hair, picked you up, and put you down 90 degrees to one side. . . . It's as if up to this moment you have been constructing a building but always standing in front of it to evaluate it. Now all of a sudden you are looking at the side of a building and seeing things you seem to have never seen before.

The central sections deal with his approaches to the cutting and splicing of film. The first approach is psychological:

> We [the audience] accept the cut because it resembles the way images are juxtaposed in our dreams. In fact, the abruptness of the cut may be one of the key determinants in actually producing the similarity between films and dreams. In the darkness of the theater, we say to ourselves, in effect, "This looks like reality, but it cannot be reality because it is so visually continuous, therefore it must be a dream."

The second approach merges the psychological with the physiological—the phenomenon of blinking:

> People will sometimes keep their eyes open for minutes at a time—at other times they will blink repeatedly—with many variations in between. The question then is, "What is causing them to blink?" . . . The blink is either something that helps an internal separation of thought to take place, or it is an involuntary reflex accompanying the mental separation that is taking place anyway . . . And that blink will occur where a cut could have happened, had the conversation been filmed. *Not a frame earlier or later*. [Italics in the original.]

I felt like one of the people who had watched Columbus stand the egg on end. Of course I knew that, now that I've learned it.

***Fritz Lang*, by Patrick McGilligan, 1997 (*The New York Times*, 20 July 1997)**

"My private life has nothing to do with my films," Fritz Lang said. Apparently Patrick McGilligan chose that line as the epigraph for his biography,

Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast (St. Martin's Press), precisely because he meant to disprove it. This he does, with numerous correlatives between Lang's life and work, but these are only part of a larger accomplishment. McGilligan justifies his subtitle by disclosing the nature of the beast.

A beast Lang certainly was, in the mythological sense, like a griffin, a creature comprising elements even more sharply contrasting than those in most of us mortals. McGilligan, with ferocious research and a touch of wonder—throughout, he seems to be shaking his head in fascination—spreads those elements before us: the quasi-diabolist artist, the sadistic perfectionist with his actors, the fervent devotee of truth, the twister of facts, the elegant immoralist, the indefatigable amorist, the disturbing seer into the giant maladies of his epoch.

If one had the gall to select a film director whose temper and style best represent this century, it could well be Lang. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon's profound phantasmagoria of our turbulences, some trenchant specters from Lang's films streak across the novel's lowering sky. How fitting they seem—instances of the way that the claw of this particular beast has scored this age. In fact, with the possible exception of Hitchcock, no director other than Fritz Lang can be said to have put such vivid images of politics-cum-terror into the unconscious of today's Western world. Lang's imagination had plenty of other reaches, but, as with Roman Polanksi, there seemed to be some sort of ghastly affinity between his life—including his personal life—and violence.

Lang was born in Vienna in 1890, had some schooling, savored a bit of café conviviality, then left for a few *Wanderjahre* as a painter of sorts. In 1914, when World War I broke out, he returned home, enlisted the next year in the Austrian Army, became an officer, was twice wounded and decorated. While on leave in Vienna he was unexpectedly asked to be in a play; his acceptance led, through further happenstance, to the writing of screenplays. When the war ended, he moved to Berlin as a screenwriter. In 1919 he began to direct his screenplays. In 1920 he met Thea von Harbou, a writer who became his screenplay collaborator, his mistress, and eventually his second wife. In 1921, with *Destiny*, he was established as a director of importance.

Destiny, a symbolic work about death (its German title, *Der müde Tod*, translates as "Weary Death"), must have had a special poignancy for a nation that lately endured four years of horrendous war, and it is still haunting. Two Lang films about an arch-criminal named Dr. Mabuse dramatized, in expressionist mode, the devil theory of history. *The Nibelungs* (1924), based on the medieval saga, was designed to bolster German morale; today it bolsters us esthetically, with its sculptural strengths. *Metropolis* (1927), about a city of the future and its mechanized slaves, remains timely. (Berliners may have seen it as an example of Max Reinhardt's influence on film. Lang's choreographed masses could have been suggested by the choreographed crowds in Reinhardt's theater productions.) *Woman in the Moon* (1929) is credited with some prophecies about space travel.

Lang's own favorite among his films, then and thereafter, was *M* (1931). "He had fastened on the idea," McGilligan writes about Lang in later life, "that *M* was his only masterpiece." In any case, it is an unshakable one—a psychotic murderer viewed as a poison in society that is purged not by police and government but by criminals and beggars. Indeed, as William Troy wrote, "The modern psychopath . . . attains to the dignity of the tragic hero" in *M*. The film has suggestions of another talent that was flowering at the time, Bertolt Brecht. It was

through Brecht's theater work that Peter Lorre, who played the child murderer, had risen to view. The clan of beggars in the Brecht-Weill *Threepenny Opera* three years earlier could not have been completely unrelated to the clan of beggars in *M*. This connection with the current theater, this furthering of contemporary imaginings, seemed only to certify Lang's place as avatar of an age. For after *M*, McGilligan writes, Lang was "one of the most critically acclaimed directors of Germany's film world."

In 1933 Hitler ascended, and Lang left for France. (Thea von Harbou chose to remain in Germany.) In France he filmed Molnár's *Liliom* (1934) with Charles Boyer, then went to Hollywood, where he spent virtually the rest of his life. His first American film was *Fury* (1936), about a lynch mob. His twenty-second Hollywood film was *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956), another look at the justice system. In between, he treated a wide range of subjects. He made an anti-Nazi film, *Hangmen Also Die* (1943), based on a story by himself and Brecht, also a Hollywood exile, and he made three westerns.

Lang's last three films were a two-part adventure story shot partly in India in 1959 and, in Germany the next year, a return to the archcriminal, Dr. Mabuse. In 1963 he appeared as himself in Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt*, after which he returned to California. Death found him in 1976, at the age of eighty-five, in Beverly Hills, still guzzling martinis and employing call girls.

About many of the "facts" of Lang's life that he himself provided, McGilligan's research hangs questions. Did Lang ever really have a first wife? If so, was he really implicated in her death by shooting after she discovered him with von Harbou *in flagrante*? Or did Lang's wife simply commit suicide? Did he leave Germany in a hurry in 1933 when Goebbels, acting for Hitler, asked him to head Nazi films? Or did he dally for months, making up his mind? Did Lang ever really marry Lily Latte, the woman who was with him for many years, through all his sex shenanigans, until the end? (Their relationship was, let's say, odd. He allowed her to have a live-in lover for a while. At other times he encouraged friends to sleep with her.)

Lang enjoyed obfuscation and contradiction. His war wounds affected his sight in some unexplained way, but, as the photographs in this bountifully illustrated book show, he wore a monocle in his left eye when he was young and, later on, a patch on his right eye. Toward his last decade he became nearly blind, yet—the crowning contradiction—he served as president of the jury at the Cannes Film Festival in 1964. He could hardly see the screen. A friend sitting next to him whispered what was happening.

Whatever he distorted or obscured about himself—for instance, when convenient, the fact that his mother was born Jewish—whatever his brutality with actors, whatever the recurrences of egomania and guile, Lang is safe behind a bulwark: the quality of his best films. Latter-day critical opinion holds that his American films are at the level of his earlier work. Certainly there are elements in the later work clearly derived from the earlier—for one instance, the shop window as emblem in *M* returns in *Fury* and in *Scarlet Street* (1945). In Hollywood, his cinematic ingenuity still prospered, still influenced others: in *You Only Live Once* (1937), a newspaper prepares three front pages to cover three possible outcomes of an event, a device apparently not lost on Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane* (1941).

But in at least one regard Lang's earlier career is incomparably superior. In Germany he was an eminence in the country's cultural life; there was no such place

to be filled in Hollywood by anyone. In the later years, McGilligan writes: "When people asked him . . . if he pined for Germany, Lang's reply was simple. 'I miss walking down the street and being called Meister.'" This is more than vanity: it is an implication of the place of film in the two cultures.

Patrick McGilligan must be one of the busiest writers about film in the United States. Since 1975 he has published four other biographies of film figures and three volumes of interviews with screenwriters and has annotated three volumes of screenplays. His passion and thoroughness make his Lang biography a permanent resource. (Lang kept voluminous journals, which were lost or destroyed. Otherwise this book would doubtless have been longer.)

McGilligan's prose is ambitious but sometimes strained. A girl has "drooping lids and soulful orbs." Words are misused: a revolver is "strewn" next to a bathtub. There is a touch of biographer's clairvoyance: "As Fritz Lang lay dying, no doubt he thought of [the character] Liliom." And the last page is simply unworthy of the book. Mr. McGilligan speculates about Lang's opinion of this biography as he reads it up in heaven. This coda sounds like a riff that the author thought he had earned by his devotion to duty in the preceding pages.

But those preceding pages do their job. Fritz Lang is set before us, with bestial nature and fulminant genius, his life lapped in the cultural and political history that made him what he was and that he, in turn, helped to epitomize.

***Mainly about Lindsay Anderson*, by Gavin Lambert, 2000 (*The New York Times*, 12 November 2000)**

Lindsay Anderson, though dead, is still a troubling man. He made only six feature films in his life, which ended in 1994 when he was seventy-one. True, he spent much of his time directing in the theater, but film was his first love, and, for most of us, it's through films that we can remember him. There's the rub. *This Sporting Life* (1963), *If . . .* (1968), *O Lucky Man!* (1973), and a few others stick in the memory, but in a peculiar way: they show us the greatness that he never quite achieved.

Egotism, distempered into sheer arrogance, nagged all of his film career. Besides the above, there was the high-handed mixing of color with black-and-white in *If . . .* without any valid explanation, the high-handed borrowings in *Britannia Hospital* (1982) with the air that they became original just because he borrowed them. Reviewing *If . . .* in 1969, I said: "If there were a way to rate talent in the abstract, Anderson would rank high among the world's directors." But from first to last, his films were marred by flaws that almost carried subtitles: "If I do it, it's all right."

It's possible that his film career had a special function for him in relation to his theater career. Anderson was a co-founder of the English Stage Company and for a time was a member of the troika that ran the company's home, the Royal Court. There, and elsewhere, his theater work won high praise. I saw only one of his theater pieces, when it came to New York, David Storey's *Home* with John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson. I suppose that, indirectly, I saw another—the film version of Storey's *In Celebration* (1974), which Anderson made after he had directed the play for the stage. Both of these pieces were excellently done and

showed a director serving an author with talent, with exceptional yet unobtrusive skill, and without intrusive ego.

In the theater, it's worth noting, no matter how a director "conceptualizes," he is the interpreter—not the author—of a given text. In the theater, relieved of the need or chance to contribute greatly to the text, the director can concentrate on directing. Thus in the theater Anderson was more constrained to focus on his true gifts, was less able to maneuver the text with personal *angst*. It seems likely, then, from the examples of *Home* and *In Celebration* and from what has been reported about other productions, that Lindsay Anderson was at his best in the theater. But in film the director most often is, or wants to be, or often must be, a co-author, expressly or indirectly, credited or not. In film the director supersedes the author, and in film Anderson seemed to be working off the strictures that the theater imposed on his ego.

The obvious precedent is Ingmar Bergman. Numerous directors have worked in both theater and film, but Bergman is the prime reference. Certainly his filmmaking, done mostly in summers when theaters were closed, was the venue where he could be his own author, freed from obligations to someone else's text. But, at his best, Bergman used film to explore themes in ways that cinema alone could afford, not as revenge on theater's conditions. Which last is what Lindsay Anderson seemed to do. Still, this doesn't totally explain why Anderson, who could have been the best film director that Britain ever produced, has left us only imperfect works, which increased in imperfection as he went along. Indeed, sheerly in terms of talent, he belongs among the pre-eminent film directors of the world in the last century. But this is true only if talent is separated from accomplishment, a schism that Anderson presses on us. Otherwise, the view must be different: his career is marked by distinguished yet unfulfilled work.

I have written different versions of the above paragraphs ever since Anderson's first feature, *This Sporting Life*, right through to the documentary he made about himself, *Is That All There Is?* (1995). Inferences about his problems could be drawn from his films, and those inferences can now be deepened with the publication of *Mainly About Lindsay Anderson* (Alfred A. Knopf). The author is Gavin Lambert, who was a schoolmate of Anderson's, was at Oxford with him, and remained a friend until Anderson's death.

Lambert himself has been a film magazine editor, screenwriter, novelist of Hollywood life, biographer of Hollywood figures, even a sometime director, and writes a fluent, wry, purring prose. His book, steeped in old acquaintance, is something of an oddity: a biography shaped as an autobiography in which the author plays a smaller role than another man. Lambert's life is the base from which we view Anderson, though at times Lambert is so taken with his own narrative that we can almost hear him reminding himself of his title. But from his long friendship and from Anderson's extensive diaries, Lambert is able to paint a full portrait of his friend, even though he spent his own life out of England—mostly in Hollywood.

Anderson was co-founder of a film journal, *Sequence*, at Oxford in 1947. *Sequence* was moved to London, and Lambert came aboard. It continued four times a year for three years, after which Lambert became editor of *Sight and Sound*, the British Film Institute magazine. In 1956 he immigrated to Hollywood at the invitation of the director Nicholas Ray to work as a dialogue director and screenwriter. Anderson stayed in England, though he disliked its snug suet-

pudding coziness, and aligned himself with leftist politics. (Later he said, "I've never been an extreme left-winger, but I think that in the 1950s and '60s there was reason to hope there might be a social democratic solution.") Yet when an industrial company asked him to make shorts, he accepted and prospered at it. This led to further film work and to membership in an anti-traditional, documentary movement called Free Cinema.

In 1957 Tony Richardson, who was also in the Free Cinema, invited him to direct for the newly organized English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theater. The fact that, as Anderson's life then worked out, he did more directing in the theater than in film—this fact is obscure in the United States because only two of his actual theater productions were shown here: the aforementioned *Home*, in 1970, and William Douglas-Home's *The Kingfisher*, with Rex Harrison and Claudette Colbert, in 1978.

Lambert, of course, saw little of his friend's theater work because he was far distant, but he knows the Anderson films well—too well, perhaps; we do not need quite so many plot details, though he often comments on them acutely. The films did not progress in a steady flow: after *This Sporting Life* came only five more features: *If . . .*, *O Lucky Man!*, *In Celebration*, *Britannia Hospital*, and *The Whales of August* (1987). (Anderson also appeared, as a film director, in *O Lucky Man!* and, much more effectively, as a Cambridge dignitary in Hugh Hudson's *Chariots of Fire* [1981].)

All his films, except *The Whales of August*, which was a terminal disaster, fascinate and infuriate because they could have been better. Incisive and exciting as they frequently are, scathing indictments of stupidity and greed and dishonor, they are nonetheless the work of an artist handicapped by his own passion. Anderson wanted to use his talent to proclaim the faults in the world, to sing the human and humane, but his impatience both with society and with the obstacles to his talent led him, as I suggested earlier, to a sort of uncontrolled vengeance on film art itself, a destructive imperiousness. Just one instance: when colleagues on *If . . .* asked him to explain why the picture was in color with sections in black and white, Anderson, presumably intoxicated with one of his rare grants of power, replied that he did not have to explain—he just shot some scenes in black and white "when I felt like it." So now *If . . .* is forever a furiously satirical-poetic attack on English public-school inanities that is pointlessly mixed in texture.

His personal behavior, too, as Lambert copiously shows, was volatile, to phrase it gently. I had one small experience of his temperament. In April 1963, I interviewed Lindsay Anderson on television, in admiration of his work with the Free Cinema movement (and I showed his 1953 documentary short *O Dreamland*, the first Anderson picture to be available in the U.S.). In July of that year I saw and reviewed *This Sporting Life* and, along with considerable praise, noted some reservations. When I ran into him a few weeks later, he behaved as if that TV conversation had been a lifetime guarantee of unqualified support on which I had ratted in my review.

Part of Anderson's *angst* had a connection, apparently, with his homosexuality. Lambert, who is also homosexual, distinguishes between himself and Anderson in this matter. When Lambert was a schoolboy of eleven, a teacher initiated him, and he "felt no shame or fear, only gratitude." (Lambert evaded service in World War II by appearing at the draft board with his eyelids painted

gold.) He recounts many of his affairs happily. On the other hand, Anderson (who served in the British Army) said in his college diaries: "It seems then that I am homosexual. Oh God. It really is rather awful and I suppose I shall never get rid of it." Some of Anderson's affairs are mentioned, along with some unrequited crushes that made him miserable (including an adoration of John Ford, of all people, about whose films he wrote a valuable book in 1981, *About John Ford*). It is hard to think that this persistent private turmoil had no effect on his public behavior, social and professional.

The differences between him and Lambert seem curiously programmatic. Lambert rejoiced in being gay, spent most of his life out of England in an environment that he enjoyed, and generally liked the mainstream film world. Anderson was uncomfortable with his sexuality, spent his life in a country he disliked, and fought the mainstream film world. The contrasts between the two men almost create a counterpoint.

Toward the end of this candid yet affectionate book, his biographer says of Anderson, "He was an idealist, and idealists seldom die happy." Gavin Lambert, by his own account, will probably die happier. But he knows very well that happiness was not the prime goal of his gifted, seething, unconsummated friend.

RE-VIEWINGS & REMEMBRANCES

Gone With the Wind, Victor Fleming, 1939 (*The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1973)

I can't remember why I saw *Gone With the Wind* a second time, in 1960. The first time was the year it came out, 1939. I hope never to see it again: twice is twice as much as any lifetime needs. But it's remarkable that after spending almost eight hours of my existence in front of this film, I can remember only two points vividly. I can kid myself that I remember much discussed moments—the crane shot of the wounded at Atlanta, Hattie McDaniel talking herself down the long stairway, and so on. But what really sticks in my mind is, first, the title itself, floating in with the wind from right to left, one giant billowy letter at a time; and, second, a scene among Southern gentlemen near the beginning, before the outbreak of war. Rhett Butler makes a truthful remark about the South's poor chances, and a young hotblood challenges him to a duel. Rhett takes the youth's impetuosity calmly and turns away. Another man tells the gloating youth that his life has just been spared, for Butler is the best pistol shot in the South.

I suppose this means that the film is most significant to me as a "property" and that only one of its cavalier flourishes struck a deep response in my own system of fantasies.

The most interesting way to consider *Gone With the Wind* today is in comparison with the film that may eventually surpass it in profits, *The Godfather* (1972). Look at the similarities. Both originated in best-selling American novels. Both are very long. Both are about predators. Both are ultra-American yet are very closely allied to Europe (Walter Scott and Sicily). And, most important, both live within codes of honor, and both codes are romances. William R. Taylor has shown, in *Cavalier and Yankee* (1961), that the "Walter Scott" antebellum South was largely a literary fabrication, concocted at the time, not retrospectively; as for *The Godfather*, our newspapers show us daily that "They Only Kill Each Other" is just another escape hatch to allow us to blink facts. "Us," by the way, means the world, not just the United States, since the whole world flocks to both films.

And that's interesting, too, because it leads to a difference, not a likeness. In a new age, when the "realistic" *Godfather* is packing them in, the romantic *Gone With the Wind* is still popular. There's a crumb of comfort in that: at least culture is still more pluralist than some of our propagandists would have us believe.

Late Autumn, Yasujiro Ozu, 1960 (*The New Republic*, 3 November 1973)

Yasujiro Ozu (1903-63) was a master. *Late Autumn*, a late film of his, is exquisite and not to be missed. It reworks so closely some themes Ozu treated earlier in his career that detailed criticism would largely be repetitive.

Made in color in 1960, *Late Autumn* is now being released in the United States as part of New Yorker Films' continuing effort to do some justice to Ozu in America. The setting is Tokyo once again, and the materials once again are generational conflict and matchmaking, subjects that Ozu liked because they contained just enough tension for the dramas he wanted to make out of everyday life. *Late Autumn* follows the attempts of three older men to help the widow of a

late friend to marry off her daughter. The daughter is less than happy at the proposals, mainly because of her reluctance to leave her mother alone; nonetheless, with her mother's assurance, the daughter marries the pre-arranged suitor, leaving the older woman to live alone.

As Paul Schrader says in *Transcendental Style in Film* (published in 1972 by the University of California Press): "Ozu's later cycle of family-office films (thirteen films from 1949 to 1962) features the estrangement of parents and children . . . the father-daughter conflict of *Late Spring* [1949] became the mother-daughter conflict of *Late Autumn* and reverted to a father-daughter conflict in *An Autumn Afternoon* [1962]." Since they are all performed by a relatively stable "company" of actors and are all directed in Ozu's beautifully idiosyncratic, gently controlled style, these films tend to interfuse in memory. But each work is like a psalm in a book of psalms to sad, lovable, sacred life. The key work of those shown here so far is still *Tokyo Story* (1953), but *Late Autumn* is by the same very fine artist. It supports Schrader's observation: "In every Ozu film, the whole world exists in one family. The ends of the earth are no more distant than outside the house."

"On Film Acting" (*The New Republic*, 30 December 1982)

Looking back at 1982, I'm struck by the number of times that the acting in an American film was good, or better, even when the script was poor, or worse. This is not a new phenomenon, but it stands out sharply in a one-year retrospect. Some widely varied examples: Peter O'Toole in *My Favorite Year*, Jack Nicholson in *The Border*, Amy Madigan in *Love Child*, Michael Keaton in *Night Shift*, Rachel Ward in *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*, Gary Busey in *Barbarosa*. The presumable reason for the disparity is that it's relatively easier to interpret than to create from scratch. This is not to say, dear actor friends, that acting is easy, that it is not an art difficult to master and capable of exquisite achievement. (One of my points here is to assail lazy assumptions about acting.) But apparently it's harder to originate a "plan" for a work than to fulfill it.

The Western world has been used to this disparity for centuries in the theater. From the Renaissance until 1890 or so, the life of the theater has depended much less on good new plays than on good acting. Theaters ran for seasons without a new play, at any rate without a successful one; audiences went to see acting, to see actors in known plays—just as audiences go today to hear singers in known operas. It was only toward the beginning of our century that "new production" came to be virtually synonymous with "new play" and that theaters were founded specifically to produce new plays, with the acting sometimes done by amateurs. And only since this time has going to the theater usually involved at least as much expectation about the play as about the acting.

At any rate we're now well accustomed to the fact that, when we go to a new play, which is what most of our theatergoing consists of, we'll probably experience better acting than writing. But what's somewhat astonishing is that this expectation, consciously or not, has become equally true in films. The much younger film medium, not yet ninety years old, has no antecedents comparable to the theater's, antecedents of centuries in which acting was prized above writing. What's more, the conditions of filmmaking—if we use theater conditions as referents—make good acting seemingly impossible. Sequences are shot out of

chronological order; individual scenes are often broken up into several days' shooting, sometimes longer; the cumulation and momentum that are integral to theater performance are unavailable in film work. (Peter O'Toole, whose performance as T. E. Lawrence still flames in memory, once told me that when he watched a certain sequence from that film for the first time, he gasped aloud as he realized that, between a long shot of him and the immediately following close-up, a year and a half had elapsed. But the performance flowed.)

Rehearsal of actors, also integral to the theater, is almost a luxury in films. Occasionally I read of a director who gets his principal actors together for as much as, say, three weeks before shooting begins. From this grandeur, rehearsals scale all the way down to the vanishing point. Actors have told me that, in films made for TV, some directors get irritated when any rehearsal at all is asked for; budgeted time has already been consumed with the camera set-up. The actor is supposed to know his job.

Even when there is some rehearsal time, even when the director is intelligent and gifted, he isn't invariably able to help his actors to any considerable degree. Many film directors feel that their basic and paramount work with actors is in casting, in finding the right person for the right role; after that, it's more or less up to the actor to deliver. You don't have to believe Hitchcock's much-quoted line—"Actors are cattle"—to infer that careful work with actors is not always among a director's strengths. One of the most cinematically fluent American directors, Howard Hawks, admitted his limitations. He said that, when he was shooting *Monkey Business* (1952), he couldn't make clear to Katharine Hepburn what he wanted her to do in certain comic scenes, and he referred her to another member of the cast, an experienced stage actor named Walter Catlett, for help. Which Catlett gave her. Hawks then wrote in more scenes for Catlett to keep the man around the set.

Logically, then, good acting ought to be very rare, but we see it again and again, even in poor scripts. If we widen the focus to include good, or good enough, scripts, we can add to this year's list such performances as Paul Newman's in *The Verdict* and Richard Pryor's in *Some Kind of Hero*. If we widen further to include foreign films, the list must include, among others, Denholm Elliott in *Brimstone and Treacle*, Jutta Lampe and Gudrun Gabriel in *Sisters, or the Balance of Happiness* (1979), Jutta Lampe and Barbara Sukowa in *Marianne and Juliane* (1981), Eva Mattes and Jürgen Arndt in *Celeste*, Jean Rochefort in *Birgit Haas Must Be Killed* (1981). This year brought confirmation that Klaus Kinski is an artist, not just a fascinating eccentric: to such past work as *Woyzeck* (1979) and *Nosferatu* (1979), he added his performances in *La Femme enfant* (1980) and *Fitzcarraldo*. And the year's list includes a performance that I rank among the best that I know: Michel Galabru as the homicidal religious-sexual psychotic in *The Judge and the Assassin* (1976).

No, there should *not* be any or much good acting in films, yet there it is, as this past year confirms again strongly. One possible explanation for its existence may lie in a psychological-aesthetic conditioning that has taken place in the acting profession in this century and that has nothing to do with the theater. Listen to the earliest recordings of singers, and you can hear that they didn't really know how to perform for recording. They were used to the opera house; the existence of recording had not been part of their cultural environment from birth. Today any mediocre tenor knows more about recording than Francesco Tamagno knew. It's

conceivable that, in the tribe of actors, a comparable conditioning has taken place in relation to camera and microphone and, most important, in relation to filmmaking conditions. I've watched fine actors on the set—Fredric March and Rex Harrison, for just two instances—and have seen how they can summon up the requisite pitch and intensity for a retake or an insert or a scene that leads into a scene that was done the day before. This more immediate access to imaginative truth seems to have been bred in good actors in this century in defense against and in *utilization* of the circumstances of filming.

Prospects.

Acting that has not yet been shown, most of which has not yet even been done—such acting matters here, too, as we'll see.

First, a general worry. People keep asking what hope there can be for depth or sophistication or subtlety in U.S. films, now that the average cost is $10 million and a bargain-basement film costs $3 million. (Obviously I'm talking only of fiction features for theaters.) The answer, I think, is that there isn't much reliable hope of that kind: what we can hope for is good entertainment, like *E.T.*, *Victor/Victoria*, *Tex*, and *The Verdict*. But an American film of some adventurousness still manages occasionally to appear. *Diner* was, for a relatively big-budget picture, relatively unorthodox in structure and method. *My Dinner with André* (1981), which cost more than might have been supposed though it was not in the big-bucks league, got made and released and found an audience. *Smithereens* is, in budget and technique ($80,000; 16mm film blown up to 35mm), the expected independent film; what's unexpected is its unique vision.

But these are exceptions. Especially in these days of darkening economic skies, it's hard to hope for further exceptions in the rest of the 1980s; it's harder still to hope for the relatively numerous exceptions that we had in the 1970s, such as *The Hired Hand* (1971), *The Conversation* (1974), *Payday* (1973), *Desperate Characters* (1971), *Mikey and Nicky* (1976), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), and *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978). (Woody Allen, whatever one thinks of him, *is* an exception: apparently he has a free hand.)

Other countries are complaining about economic conditions, are doubtless more straitened than they were, and will worsen in the expected slump; but they are still able to make films for much less than the U.S. figures—*and* they still get one type or another of government subsidy. These economic facts, combined with cultural differences that I've explored more than once, mean that Americans who want something in addition to—not instead of—entertainment will probably have to depend increasingly on the best of foreign films. This is not a credo of inverse parochialism: it is experience applied to expectation.

But confining ourselves to American prospects, we can still find some bright sides to look on. It's hard to believe that at least a few U.S. films will not be exceptions to probabilities and prophecies. It's easy to believe that many U.S. films will be good entertainment and that they will be cinematically excellent. American photography, design, editing, and recording are unsurpassed in the world.

And, in continuing paradox—miracle, if you like—the acting in U.S. films will often be good, occasionally better than that. This may be the brightest possible side to look on in the American film future. Strictures on subject and method will make good acting stand out more clearly as it transcends conventional scripts.

This may lead us to be more aware of acting as an art with its own aesthetics and standards; in the mind of the audience, acting may return to the high place it held a century ago. Taste in acting has long been declining, even among those with finely developed taste in other arts. Necessity may turn out to be the mother of attention.

The Lost One (*Der Verlorene*), Peter Lorre, 1951 (*The New Republic*, 13 & 20 August 1984)

Listen, we are calling you back. Driven
out
You must now return. The country
Out of which you were driven flowed
once
With milk and honey. You are being
called back
To a country that has been destroyed. And we have nothing more
To offer you than the fact that you are
needed.

Thus, in 1950, Bertolt Brecht, back in Berlin, in his poem "To the Actor P. L. in Exile." But, like much in Brecht's life, the poem is paradoxical. Though Peter Lorre had not returned to the German stage, he was no longer in exile: he was at the moment living in Bavaria; and he had already returned to (West) Germany to make a film that was released the following year. That film, *The Lost One* (1951), has lived up to its name: it had its first American showing at Filmex in Los Angeles last year and has just had its U.S. theatrical premiere at the Film Forum in New York.

It's a disappointment, not nearly worth Lotte Eisner's praise in her 1952 book *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema*, but it's a poignant occasion in a poignant life. Lorre, as is unknown to the world that thought him a Hollywood freak, was a serious and experienced theater actor before he went into films. Born in Hungary (as László Loewenstein), trained in Vienna, he made his Berlin début in 1929, aged twenty-five. Brecht had a hand in that début and soon used Lorre in his own plays. Lang saw the début and ticketed Lorre for *M* in 1931. (I've always thought that Brecht was an unseen presence in *M*, both in stimulation of the script and in the directing of Lorre's performance.)

After a few more German films, Lorre immigrated to England in 1933 and was soon launched on his "monster" career in Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934). He went to Hollywood and quickly succeeded in a line of bizarre roles. By the time the refugee Brecht arrived in 1941, Lorre was rich and very helpful. But self-disgust (apparently) had made him a morphine addict; this and other factors severely affected his film success. He had to take other steps to keep working. Out of need but also because, it seems clear, he wanted to do some anointing of a troubled conscience, he returned to Germany, found likely film material and a producer, collaborated on a script, directed, and played the leading role.

The Lost One is based on the true story of a certain Dr. Rothe, a German

immunologist who had murdered his fiancée in 1943 on suspicion that she was conveying his experiments to the British. He formed a habit of murdering women. Most of the film takes place after the war (with many flashbacks) in a refugee camp near Hamburg, where the doctor is now working with an assistant—the former Gestapo official who covered up the doctor's first murder. The past haunts the doctor, and after considerable torment he finds his way out through several deaths, including his own.

What a pleasure it would be to help celebrate the discovery of a lost gem, to help certify posthumously the act of personal reclamation that Lorre intended. But the film is heavy, slow, cinematically trite. The reminders of *M* are frequent and funereal. Lorre's direction is clumsily imitative of early Fritz Lang. Worst of all, the psychological and moral dramas in the story are never clarified and fulfilled. The tone is assumptive, as if the film were saying, "You know the sort of anguish we mean." Too much of what we see comes down to Lorre, as the doctor, smoking cigarettes and pacing silently amidst the shadows.

Still, it's Lorre himself who is the one interesting feature. Here is a man who had spent many years playing supporting roles coming again to the center. The frustration of the film is that he gives a screen-filling performance, even with touches of the sadly romantic. But he needed a better director and a better script—Lorre himself was in fact something of a writer. (He is rumored to have collaborated with Brecht on some lost poems. Brecht thought he was the best reader of German poetry in the world.) But this script is a misfire.

Lorre didn't accept the invitation in Brecht's poem. His Hollywood career picked up again, possibly as a result of his work in *The Lost One*, which otherwise had no success. He made eighteen more American films, one of which, John Huston's *Beat the Devil* (1953), was worth his talent. He died in March 1964 of a heart seizure, three months short of his sixtieth birthday.

A Passage to India, David Lean, 1984 (*The New Republic*, 10 June 1985)

I've been collecting reviews of *A Passage to India* (1984) by people who don't usually review films, and a curious lot these exhibits are. Noel Annan (*The New York Review of Books*, January 17th) describes the meeting between David Lean, eventually the screenwriter-editor-director of the film, and the dons of King's College, Cambridge, which is E. M. Forster's executor. Annan says the dons had read a screenplay of the novel by Santha Rama Rau that reassured them enough about the eventual quality of the film such that they were willing to meet with Lean. But "as it turned out"—an odd phrase because the dons' reassurance had come from Rau's script—David Lean wrote his own screenplay. Says Annan, "It was not difficult to predict the result." Indeed it wasn't: Lean's film is for Annan a self-fulfilling prophecy. Lean made the film as it is, says Annan, because he has "little respect for [his audience]."

But what about Annan's respect for his readers? He makes two glaring and important misstatements of fact. He says that the film "begins with the arrival of the P & O liner that brings not only Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested to Bombay, but the Viceroy as well"; and that the film "ends in Srinagar with magnificent shots of the Himalayas." Neither of these statements is true. The film begins and ends in rainy London. This is something more than a detail: the start and finish are Lean's

attempt to round off the themes, to transmute into cinematic form some of the ideas-—especially at the end of the book—that he felt would not work on screen in Forster's form. With that frame of start and finish, Lean is trying to imply Britain's failures in India and India's inevitable triumphs. Annan doesn't deal with these attempts by Lean: he simply rules that they don't exist.

In the February 14th issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Frank Kermode writes that, as he recalls, Annan wasn't present at that Cambridge meeting (although the impression in Annan's article is otherwise) and that his report wasn't entirely accurate. Santha Rama Rau's screenplay could not have figured in the matter, says Kermode, because Lean had sent copies of his own screenplay to Cambridge in advance of the meeting. Again, where is Annan's respect for his readers? (Kermode feels he must note that he tested Lean's vaunted knowledge of the novel by asking him the name of Ronnie Heaslop's Hindu servant. On this weighty question, Lean flunked. So much for upstart film rabble.)

Now Christopher Hitchens weighs in with a three-page scathing review of the film in the journal *Grand Street* (Spring 1985). An aggregate of about one page is devoted to quotations from Forster's letters and from Lean's indefensibly grandiose comments in interviews. This décor is insufficient for Hitchens, as he ends with rumor: "Rumors filtering from the set suggest that we were narrowly spared even worse—we hear of Alec Guinness walking off one scene, of Peggy Ashcroft being invited to play the rendezvous in the mosque with more love interest." (Bother the fact that it's not a rendezvous, in novel or film; it's an accidental meeting.) Hitchens insists that even what we *don't* see proves that the film is bad.

He complains that Lean "manages to be unfair to everybody. The British are portrayed in stock terms, as brutes, duffers, or eccentrics, and the Indians as chattering *babus*, servile and cunning by turns." Tapan Raychaudhuri, who teaches Asian history at Oxford, disagrees about the source of the "stock terms" and Lean's use of them (*The* [London] *Times Literary Supplement*, April 5th). In his review Raychaudhuri writes:

> The Indian characters in Forster's novel are not entirely convincing and are somewhat stereotyped, as are his British bureaucrats. . . . [Lean's] Anglo-Indians . . . appear more real in the novel, as much the creatures of historical circumstance as are the hapless lot they rule over.

Though Raychaudhuri spots some startling gaffes in the film, he calls it "pure enchantment; a splendid film." Yet he, too, says: "A forced happy ending is the logical climax of [Lean's] vision of India." One might dispute this view of the concluding scenes in India, but—again—they are not the end of the film. It ends, not amidst snowy peaks but in Adela Quested's rain-curtained living room.

I'm hardly arguing that one must like the film. Some of my best friends don't. The point is that, in these articles, those who dwell in strata high above the film world have deigned to descend to find support for their prejudices. Annan says: "Every great novel loses when dramatized because it conveys meaning that cannot be seen on the screen." In an isolated state, this platitude is inarguable, but all it does experientially is to prepare Annan and like thinkers to discount any film made from a great novel. Obviously no great novel *needs* to be filmed, but in the right hands—as experience proves soundly—a great novel can be filmed in a way

that puts another art truly at its service, a way that conveys meanings visible on the screen. Examples: Robert Bresson's 1951 film of Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest*, Éric Rohmer's film of Kleist's *The Marquise of O . . .* in 1976.

I don't contend that Lean's film is in their class; but I saw it again recently, and apart from the atrocious score (which won an Oscar!), I think even more firmly that the art in its making transmutes major elements of the novel into cinematic form, suggests other resonances, and honors Forster. With his view of film, he might not have acknowledged the honor; nonetheless I think it was paid to him.

"Japanese Film" (*The New Republic*, 3 February 1986)

Invited by the Japan Foundation, I've just spent two weeks in Tokyo and Kyoto. Among the many interesting people I met were some film figures.

Mitsuo Yanagimachi chose to meet in a Tokyo coffee shop. (All conversations were through able interpreters, assigned by the foundation.) The coffee shop has a back room that one enters over stepping-stones across a small pool; and that back room, full of people talking much and eating little, was where we sat. Yanagimachi, now in his early forties, directed *Himatsuri* (*Fire Festival*, 1985), which was shown at the last New York Film Festival, then bad a run at the Bleecker Street Cinema. In the currently dim Japanese film scene, he is one of the lights, and by now he is used to being trotted out to meet visitors—not bored, just ready, experienced. Somewhat plump, casually dressed, he responded to questions thoughtfully and skillfully.

He has been making films for about twelve years; *Himatsuri* was his fourth feature. (It was backed in part by Seibu, a department store. Apparently big department stores have a Medicean function in Japan: I saw a dance program in a small theater next to an art gallery on the top floor of Seibu.) I had been more struck by the subject of *Himatsuri* than by the film as a whole. A lumberman who lives in a fishing village with his wife and children resists the encroachments of industrialization; one day he goes to the forest and embraces the trees as if in farewell; then he goes home and kills his family and himself. My concern had been that, to a Japanese audience apparently, the lives of the man's family as well as his own were at his disposal, as part of his protest against pollution.

Yanagimachi understood my concern but was not disturbed by it. He stressed the difference in view between East and West on the subject of individualism; in the East, he said, individualism is often best realized through, or is lesser than, communion with great forces. He stressed the pantheist nature of Shintoism. He stressed that the murders and the suicide were meant metaphorically (although suggested by an actual case). He felt that some action had to be taken against Western influence, even when that influence was spread by the Japanese themselves. He said that too many people, like his parents, were resigned, felt helpless about the destruction of old values. (His actual phrase was "Go fight City Hall.") *Himatsuri* had been at least one small counterblow that might encourage further resistance.

I was more interested in listening to him than in arguing with him. Anyone who has read anything about Japan knows that the basic struggle there, ideological-spiritual-cultural, is between old and new. What a visitor might have

expected was that the old values would be defended by old fogies or by young adulators of old fogies. But here was someone who was dressed and looked like a man in a Soho café where he might have been expounding on self-gratification in one lexicon or another; and instead this man was talking about the importance of tradition and devotional standards. This hip-looking man ended by saying that, in certain circumstances, suicide is not the abnegation of life but its culmination, its fulfillment.

Woman in the Dunes (1964) is one of my favorite Japanese films. I was eager to talk with the director, Hiroshi Teshigahara, especially since he has made only a few films since then, not much seen or discussed. We met in an astonishing place: a beautifully decorated conference room on the top (eleventh) floor of an exquisite modern Tokyo building that is entirely a school of flower arrangement.

Teshigahara is a gray-haired, elegant man, large for a Japanese, and was dressed in chic, Italian-style sports clothes. He was gracious but without effusion. He is the head of this school, which is highly regarded and quite successful, and has been running it since 1980. He is also a ceramist and has had numerous exhibits of his work. He inscribed for me a copy of the catalog of his Paris exhibition in 1981.

I said that this building (designed by Kenzo Tange), the school, the ceramics explained why he had made relatively few films in the past years. But I told him how much *Woman in the Dunes* has meant to me—even more so during my few days in Tokyo. The film underscores the idea that space does not equal freedom, that the world can be crystallized wherever you are. I had to hope that he was going to continue making films. He replied that be had a project in mind, historical. Then he explained, without being asked, what has kept him from spending more time on films. His father had founded this school; when his father died, his sister took it over. Then, within a year, she died. Teshigahara could not abandon the school, out of obligation to the teachers and the students but principally out of obligation to his father. He himself had not been very good at flower arrangement when he started, he said, but he has come to love it: sculpture with the ephemeral. I looked at this elegant man sitting in this lovely room, with the gardens of the Imperial Palace visible behind and below: a gifted film artist who had skimped on that aspect of his work out of regard for family obligations, obligations to an art that recognized its own mortality. I said that, meager though my qualifications for judgment were, I couldn't imagine anything more Japanese.

When my remark was translated, he smiled and nodded once, sharply.

In Kyoto I had a reunion with the great cinematographer Kazuo Miyagawa. (A few of the films in his long career: with Yasujiro Ozu, *Floating Weeds* [1959]; with Kon Ichikawa, *Enjo* [1958] and *Tokyo Olympiad* [1965]; with Kenji Mizoguchi, *Ugetsu* [1953] and *Sansho the Bailiff* [1954]; with Akira Kurosawa, *Rashomon* [1950] and *Yojimbo* [1961].) I had met him in New York when I introduced him at the start of a Miyagawa retrospective at the Japan Society and had lunched with him the day after. I had felt immediately drawn to this tiny, white-haired, warm man who had come from so far in so many senses and yet felt so close. Now seventy-seven and spry, he hurried across the Kyoto hotel lobby to hug me. Very un-Japanese.

Miyagawa had begun work on *Kagemusha* with Kurosawa in 1980, had done a few sequences, but had developed eye trouble and was told by doctors that he was going blind. In fact, he has just finished another picture with

Masahiro Shinoda, for whom he did the exquisite color photography of *The Ballad of Orin* in 1977.

As we drank tea, I asked him how he had got into films. He had begun his career by doing ink drawings, he said, then still photography. In those days before the Second World War, Kyoto had been a filmmaking center, and his sister had a girlfriend who got him a job in a studio film lab, doing developing. He is vehement about the importance to his subsequent career of his experience in the development lab. That work, plus his ability as a second baseman on the studio ball team, got him a chance as a camera assistant.

The next day we passed a Buddhist temple with a front wall made of huge stones. Miyagawa said that he had made the first shot of his first film in front of that wall, in 1935. He then led us through the very long, very narrow open-air food market of the town, jammed with people doing their shopping for New Year's Eve dinner (this was December 31st), a big event in Japan. He darted ahead through the swarm and came back with a present, a thick rice cake topped with a tangerine, a typical New Year's decoration. He showed us a small Shinto shrine, hidden just off this thronged street. He and the young interpreter quickly bowed their beads over palm-pressed hands. Then he took us to lunch at a restaurant that specialized in Kyoto cooking. When we came out, he gestured toward a glitzy modern shop across the street. It was the site of his birthplace. Then he gestured the other way toward a low stucco building: his grammar school.

Miyagawa has worked all over Japan, of course, but a good deal of the time be has worked in Kyoto, which he hates to leave. Many Western artists of various kinds have been rooted in their native regions, but cinematographers? Miyagawa works in, sometimes leaves, but always returns to Kyoto, his home and his replenishment.

All the Japanese films I have seen are, visually, almost unsurpassed and only rarely equaled. Even when they are boring as dramas, as was Teinosuke Kinugasa's *Gate of Hell* (1953), they are ravishing to the eye; that film contained as beautiful color pictures as I can remember on the screen. When the drama matches the visual quality, the result is a stunner like Kurosawa's *Rashomon*.

Shiro Toyoda's *The Mistress* (1953), while not in the same class as *Rashomon*, was quite enjoyable when I first saw it in 1959, and, after seeing it again recently, I'd like to discuss it a bit, along with one other Japanese film. The *Mistress*'s story, which is its weakness, takes place in 1900 and tells of a poor girl who becomes a rich merchant's mistress in order to provide for her ailing father, whom she cannot otherwise adequately support. The merchant sets her up in her own house—and also gets a house for the father. She is ashamed of her position, more so when she discovers that her benefactor is married and that he is a moneylender, not a merchant. (Why these are added indignities one does not learn.) A handsome young medical student passes her door daily on the way to school. She falls in love with him and he is attracted to her, but he holds back because he has an appointment to leave Japan as apprentice to a German doctor. Still, the inspiration of her brief, unfulfilled love for him gives her the courage to break out of her gilded cage and be free. (Her father, for whom she first accepted concubinage, presumably is now free, too: to starve.)

This heart-throb drama would have been rejected indignantly thirty-five years ago by Norma Talmadge and Richard Barthelmess as old-hat. But it is tolerable here because it is well acted by a popular star, in the title role—not only

touchingly acted but acted in a style that has an exotic interest of its own. There is no Kabuki formalism about it or quaint, gift-shop Oriental flavor; it is a style rooted in the human springs of another culture and is affecting.

Then, too, as in many foreign pictures, there are fascinating glimpses of foreign mores. I had thought that, unlike some closer to home, the Japanese husband was an unquestioned king, but the moneylender's righteously harrying wife might just have loosened her corsets in Levittown. The position of mistress in the community, the slavish devotion of her infatuated patron, the odd ways that people did or didn't make a living, the way children played and students celebrated—all these and more are incidental and valuable bonuses.

But the chief richness of the film is in its filming. The director, Toyoda, and his cinematographer, Mitsuo Miura, make us feel again that there is a special magic built into Japanese movie cameras. This black-and-white film is photographed in a succession of subtle lights and exquisite compositions that achieve a double effect: they tinge the players and the backgrounds with poetry and at the same time make them more immediate and real. That statement is tautological, of course, but let us remember that many Occidental moviemakers tirelessly equate immediacy with bleak naturalism.

It appears that Kihachi Okamoto was also a director much under the generally benevolent influence of Kurosawa, to judge from Okamoto's film *Samurai Assassin*, which I saw for the first time in 1965, the year of its release. *Samurai Assassin*, like some of Kurosawa's pictures, is a bloody melodrama phrased in pictorial compositions so exquisite that they make it a kind of visualized ballad; is edited, for the most part, as if electric sparks connect sequences, yet with an almost reflective languor in the middle of some scenes; employs the pan shot frequently to keep a scene flowing from one actor to another to another. (We are told by some film aestheticians that the pan shot is a mistaken concept because it controverts the natural use of the eye: we don't "pan" in life, we blink and shift our gaze. But strict correspondence to life seems a limiting aesthetic canon. One reason that the pan or traveling or trucking shot, discreetly used, seems valuable to me is precisely that it provides a kind of vision—a continuum of excitement and growth—not possible in life: experience converted into a smoothly unrolling ribbon.)

Okamoto's picture is not as good as Kurosawa's similar films because the beginning is too slow and complicated; the characters are less sharply individualized; there is too much serious reliance on the lurid story, not enough directorial comment and viewpoint. The film builds to one long fight: an attack on a lord by a group of rebels who have to battle his bodyguards; and Okamoto is determined that we shall have plenty of what we have waited for. There is much hacking and piercing and gouging, all in a series of brief shocks that are well choreographed and assembled. But so *much* gore tempts us to giggle.

Like many samurai films, this one deals with the period in the mid-nineteenth century when the feudal system was dissolving. The hero, a samurai without a lord, cannot get a post because his father is unknown to him. He becomes a hired bravo for a political band who are out to murder a despot, and, after the long battle described above, he decapitates the despot and bears the head off on a pike. He does not know, as anyone familiar with Verdi's *Il Trovatore* could have told him, that the man he killed was his close kin.

Toshiro Mifune plays the samurai as excellently (and this is the trouble) as

he has played him several times before: a roistering, brave, rude, excellent swordsman. The actor of such varied roles as the thief in *The Lower Depths* (1957), the proud general in *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), the old businessman in *I Live in Fear* (1955), the younger businessman in *High and Low* (1963)—all films by Kurosawa—is harping too much on one string, even if it is a good and profitable one. But the picture is worth seeing. For one thing, no one seems able to handle snow in films as well as the Japanese. The last fight is a frantic white ballet.

Japanese films, alas, still seem to arrive from another planet, and many Japanese pictures probably could not succeed in the United States because they would have little meaning for Americans. But it is hard to believe that there would not be appreciative and sufficiently large audiences for more Japanese films than are now shown.

Elena and Her Men, Jean Renoir, 1956 (*The New Republic*, 30 June 1986)

Jean Renoir's *Elena and Her Men*, made in 1956, has not been shown theatrically in the United States since 1957, when it was released here, dubbed into English, under the title *Paris Does Strange Things*. Now the Film Program at the Public Theater in New York brings us the original version, subtitled. I assume there is also some dubbing in this French version because the leading man is the American Mel Ferrer. Ingrid Bergman, the leading woman, plays a princess who was made Polish, I assume, to explain her accent in French. (She too may have been dubbed. At any rate, Renoir is said to have thought her French "scarcely adequate," especially since she went home every evening and spoke Italian with her then-husband, Roberto Rossellini.)

I had never seen the film in any version and hurried to what I expected to be a disappointment: which it proved to be. This flip remark—about a man who made masterpieces and had immense influence on other directors—is justified as much by the writings about the film as by the film itself. Renoir calls *Elena and Her Men* a "musical fantasy" and treats it as a divertissement with some knives hidden among the flowers. I don't think the knives are very sharp or the flowers very beguiling, but nowhere does he imply the aspirations that have been attributed to *Elena* by others. Jean-Luc Godard: "'The' French film *par excellence* . . . because it is the most intelligent of films. Art and theory of art, at one and the same time; beauty and the secret of beauty." François Truffaut: "Renoir in his greatest period." Concede that these two young *Cahiers du cinéma* critics were then promoting the "personal" approach to filmmaking that Renoir certainly embodied. Still, those comments were part of an impassioned rhetoric that became exemplary for critical mimics at home and abroad and that helped to establish the *auteur* view of (among others) Renoir. This view takes the director's style as the career's principal achievement. It tends to blur distinctions among individual works, or even more idiosyncratically, it exalts dubious works in the career as if to controvert non-*auteur* critics who prefer the Renoir films in which his style is employed to more fulfilling purpose. So *Elena*, as I feared, did not live up to its advance billing.

It is set in Paris at the turn of the century, but it centers on a woman's intrigues to promote a military dictator clearly based on General Georges

Boulanger (1837-91), whose rightist plottings had collapsed over a decade earlier. Now to make a flirtatious musical comedy on that subject at any time would have risked trivialization of grave matters. (Boulanger committed suicide.) To make such a musical only eleven years after the end of World War II verges on the callously recuperative. "History in . . . *Elena and Her Men* . . . becomes subordinated to the demands of art," wrote Leo Braudy. The same might be said about the musical show *Springtime for Hitler* contained within Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (1967).

Bergman, a widow, agrees to marry an elderly rich businessman because she needs money. In a crowd honoring a popular general on July 14th (Bastille Day), she meets a wealthy young idler, Ferrer. He introduces her to his friend the general, Jean Marais, who is smitten with Bergman at first sight even though he has a devoted mistress. Then the general's advisers ask Bergman to use her wiles on him, to persuade him to seize power—especially since a war threat with Germany has flared over an accident with an observer balloon. (This, from the maker of *La Grande illusion* [1937], could be tolerable only if it were funny.) Bergman's rich fiancé agrees to the scheme out of patriotism. The final sorting-out takes place in a small-town brothel, which is used, not like the brothel in Genet's *The Balcony*—a symbolic place where prostitution and power intermingle—but for conventional male fantasy, a haven where all the girls are gorgeous and everyone is jolly. The last offense is to show us that French men and women, including the crowd surrounding the brothel, are more interested in lovemaking than in politics. Bergman ends up with Ferrer, the general goes off with his mistress, and France is saved from dictatorship by *l'amour.*

Elena and Her Men needn't have been "the most intelligent of films." It could indeed have had exactly the same risky script if it had been in the hands of a René Clair or Ernst Lubitsch. But Renoir plods. Apparently, in order to have a light touch, he needed a serious subject, as in that great film *The Rules of the Game* (1939). He deliberately reminds us here of that pre-war film: part of *Elena* is set in a chateau, has love chases with servants, and even a fat female guest. The reminder was a further mistake.

No director of Renoir's talents could make a film without showing them. His style is visible in *Elena and Her Men* and mostly consists, as usual, of attempts to meld theater and film. In the first scene, for instance, he "deepens" the screen by pivoting from a two-shot of Bergman and a friend at a piano, seemingly alone, to show us two people playing cards beyond them in an alcove—the way a theater director might suddenly turn on the lights upstage. When Bergman's carriage is trapped in the July 14th crowd, we first get the size of the crowd only by the people visible through the window—another theater effect. But every sequence that is supposed to be feathery and tickling—like the later misplacing of a child in that crowd scene—sorely lacks the touch that Clair could have given it.

Even if it were better than it is, *Elena and Her Men* would still sag because of it two leading actors. Renoir made the film, he said, because of Ingrid Bergman: "I wanted to see her laugh and smile on the screen." She looks beautiful, and she does laugh and smile a lot, but none of this makes her a competent comedienne. (It's a Danielle Darrieux role.) As for Mel Ferrer, the idea of associating charm and elegance with him gave me the only laugh in his performance. (It was a part for Gérard Philipe.) Renoir's casting of Bergman and Ferrer—presumably with at least one eye on the international box office—sank the ship before it was launched.

Sunnyside, Charles Chaplin, 1919 (*The New Republic*, 22 May 1989)

To celebrate the centennial of Charlie Chaplin's birth, I saw a Chaplin film I had never seen. *Sunnyside*, one of the longest pictures of his first screen decade—twenty-nine minutes—by one mischance or another had eluded me through the years. In April the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted a two-week "Centennial Celebration" of Charlie's pictures and showed *Sunnyside* on the first day. I was there.

Sunnyside, to put it grudgingly, doesn't disappoint if one is prepared for an imperfect work. Those who have written about it, in 1919 and more recently, warned of its imperfections. Chaplin himself said that making it "had been like pulling teeth." (His turbulent private life was distracting him at the time.) I can't disagree with the adverse comment; still, I'm grateful to have filled the gap in my Chaplin experience, for the pleasures that are in the film, and for the chance to see its connections with his subsequent career.

He is a farmhand here, in a village called Sunnyside, with a harsh boss who rouses him at 4 a.m., reads the Bible a lot, and kicks Charlie's seat a lot. Charlie is enamored of a village lass played by Edna Purviance, and after various adventures, many of which involve a city slicker who makes him jealous, Charlie gets the girl.

Some of the materials foreshadow later use. Virtue is ignored before it is rewarded—a recurrent Chaplin theme. The burly farmer and the slim hired man sitting at a bare wooden table in a bare room immediately suggest the cabin scene in *The Gold Rush* (1925). Later, when Charlie is driving some cows along a road with a stick while he reads a book, the cows wander off unnoticed by the absorbed Charlie. A broad-bottomed woman is bent over in the road before him as he comes along, and he absently taps her with the stick. This may be the seed of the moment in *Modern Times* (1936) when the assembly-line worker, crazed by twisting two nuts with two wrenches hour after hour, wanders into the street with his hands still twisting and meets a buxom woman with two large buttons on her bodice.

Again Chaplin shows a familiar odd mixture in his work. The village street could be anywhere in Europe, but all the people are Yankee. So are the targets of his comic jabs. The opening iris shot of a church steeple, the title itself, and the religiosity of the tyrannical old farmer are double-edged comments: on the sanctimonious harshness of country life and on the then-prevailing American theater and film claptrap about that life.

The story strains and bumps along, but this look at the underside of rural romance is sharp. And, however arbitrarily, Chaplin gives himself the chance for one of his best dance sequences. A runaway cow knocks him unconscious, and in the dream that follows, four garlanded, lightly clad nymphs summon him to a woodland frolic. With two tufts of his hair lifted to look like Pan's horns, he gambols with them—beautifully. Nor does he forget the Chaplin wry touch: in the middle of his dream, he lands on a cactus.

Love, Károly Makk, 1971 (*The New Republic*, 11 March 1991)

When Károly Makk's *Love* was released in the United States in 1973, I was

one of those who called it a treasure. I had a proprietary interest in this Hungarian film because Lili Darvas, the actress who played the key role of a bedridden old woman, was a beloved friend. (She lived in New York but had returned to Budapest, her native city, for this picture.) I felt that *Love*, in addition to its intrinsic beauties, justified the very existence of cinema. Every good film is such a justification, of course, but this one was especially precious to me because it preserved an example of Lili Darvas's art.

Love wasn't much of a success. Darvas and Mari Törőcsik, who plays her daughter-in-law, had won prizes at the Cannes Festival of 1971, and there were other awards; still, *Love* didn't come to the U.S. immediately. When it arrived, it was generally well reviewed, yet soon disappeared. A few years ago Joseph Papp's film theater at the Public ran a Makk retrospective that included a splendid, fresh print of *Love*. Otherwise it has appeared only infrequently in revival houses. A 16mm print was rentable if you happened to know the people who owned it—for some reason, it had vanished from the catalogues—and I showed it often in film courses. Always and unfailingly there was the same result: those who were seeing it for the first time were overwhelmed and were also outraged that such a wonderful work had been kept from them, sealed in a cold vault by commerce.

Now, to my surprise and joy, *Love* is on videotape, made from an excellent print and subtitled clearly. Now it is freed from that vault, and any of us can have it when we like. That this is a commonplace paradox by now—hundreds of fine films that did little at the box office are now on tape—doesn't in the slightest diminish my happiness in this case. The appearance of *Love* on tape is, for me, a justification of the existence of the VCR, just as the original justified cinema itself. The usual complaints about tapes don't figure here: the reduced image is excellently graded in its black-and-white range, and the frame is unaltered. Without qualification, this tape is a blessing. It's available from the Connoisseur Video Collection in Los Angeles at $59.95 plus shipping. That seems little enough for a masterpiece.

I reviewed the film at length in *The New Republic* in 1973, and will note here only an aspect that is underscored every time I see it. *Love* is a perfect example of political art. (Equal emphasis on both words.) Tibor Déry's screenplay, derived from two of his stories, is about a dying old woman, who still has about her an air of Franz Joseph elegance; her daughter-in-law, who visits her daily and supplies her with fake letters from her son in America; and the son, who is in fact a political prisoner in Budapest. (The time is presumably the late 1950s.) Makk, his cinematographer, János Tóth, his composer, András Milhály, his editor, György Sivó—all of them superb—have concentrated intensely on the kinds of love that exist among these three people and how love is affected by the climate in which one dares to have hopes about it. The film is a cry against tyranny from innermost privacies. By concentrating on three people and their feelings, it presents a world and its history.

A little more than a year after *Love* was released in America, Lili Darvas died. Still, after viewing this tape, that statement seems somehow incorrect.

***Spartacus*, Stanley Kubrick, 1960 (*The New Republic*, 27 May 1991)**

Those who missed it or weren't around when it was first released in 1960

now have a chance to see *Spartacus*—all three-and-a-half hours of it. Apparently inspired by the success of the *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) re-release in 1988, Universal engaged Robert A. Harris, who was in charge of the reconstruction of *Lawrence*, to do the same for this picture. About the restoration of previously omitted material, I can't comment after the lapse of thirty-one years, but the restored scene about which there has been most publicity—a veiled reference by a Roman patrician to his sexual tastes—must have been in the 1960 version that I saw because I referred to it in my original review.

The screenplay was by Dalton Trumbo from a Howard Fast novel, two names that had been shadowed in the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) days. Since Universal implicitly asks for comparison with *Lawrence of Arabia*, it seems fair to say that the *Spartacus* script is not in the same universe as Robert Bolt's for the other film. Still, its romance, between the slave-gladiator Spartacus and the slave girl who becomes his wife, is more amusing than ridiculous, just an obeisance to a genre convention. As for the grandiose libertarian sentiments that *Spartacus* utters, Trumbo and Fast, whether they knew it or not, were merely following a tradition.

The revolt of the slave-gladiators led by Spartacus in 72 B.C. was the subject of a blank-verse play, *The Gladiator*, by Robert Montgomery Bird, presented in 1831 by Edwin Forrest, the first native-born American star, who played the title role. It was a success and remained in his repertoire for years. Democratic affirmations were part of Forrest's stock-in-trade in the new republic, and nothing in the current screenplay is more orotund and anachronistic than

> Man is heaven's work, and beggars' brats may 'herit
> A soul to mount them up the steeps of fortune,
> With regal necks to be their stepping blocks.—

This makes the Trumbo-Fast diction sound conservative.

In 1960 I thought more highly of Stanley Kubrick's directing and Russell Metty's color cinematography than I do now, but partly that is due to Kubrick's own subsequent accomplishments in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) and (cinematically anyway) in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), partly to *Lawrence of Arabia* itself—David Lean's directing and Freddie Young's camera. Alex North's music for *Spartacus*—raucous Hollywood self-parody—is very much worse than Maurice Jarre's for Lean. In only one respect is *Spartacus* remotely comparable to *Lawrence*: some of Kubrick's actors are as good as all of Lean's.

Peter Ustinov, as a slave dealer, is still masterfully comic in his slyly frank greed and cowardice. Charles Laughton, as a democratic womanizing senator, is at his cunning best. I never really believe a word that Laughton says, but I'm always mesmerized by his thaumaturgic power with words. And Laurence Olivier. To see him again as an arrogant patrician senator is to regret again—even more—that I never saw his *Coriolanus*, which he had done in two English productions before *Spartacus* was made and which was reputedly one of his best roles. Clearly he drew strands from his *Coriolanus* experience for the fabric of his performance here; to judge by photos, his makeup is the same. He is superb. (In one brief relooped sequence, his lines are dubbed by Anthony Hopkins, unobtrusively.)

Jean Simmons is no less charming than ever in the impossible role of the slave girl. Tony Curtis is still "a singger of songgs." Kirk Douglas, jaw muscles and

all, still strives to energize the title role—to show, in a part written like a recipe, humor, tenderness, resolve, and nobility.

But *Spartacus* is a product, not a production, a spectacular product with thousands of extras in some of its battle scenes but never more than a contraption. The Hollywood vaults are full of such historical artifacts. Are they all going to be restored and re-released? I hope not. We couldn't expect all, or any, of them to be up to the standard of *Lawrence of Arabia*, so, ladies and gentlemen of the West Coast, some moderation, please.

Gun Crazy, Joseph H. Lewis, 1950 (*The New Republic*, 24 June 1991)

It's like old times. The *auteur* theory has surfaced again. This is the critical approach, French in origin (*cela va sans dire*) and prominent in the two decades after World War II, which proposed that the director is the true author of a film, that his style determines its quality, that such elements as acting, dialogue, and thematic gravity are at most secondary. For the past twenty years or so, that critical view has been buried in a subsequent avalanche of quite different theories, again mostly French in origin—structuralism, semiology, deconstruction, feminism, and others. But a recent film program at the Public Theater in New York took us back to *auteurisme*.

The occasion was a bill devoted to one of that school's favorite directors, Joseph H. Lewis, and to its favorite Lewis work, *Gun Crazy*. It was made in 1949 and, ever since, has been stoutly promoted by some as an ignored masterpiece. Its reappearance has brought forth considerable comment, including a paean by Jay Cocks and Martin Scorsese. This revival, which will probably cause ripples elsewhere, makes the *auteur* view visible again.

I'm glad of it. It reminds us all, including non-*auteurists* like myself, that there are such things in a critic as a passion for films, a belief in their pleasure and their artistic importance. Foolish as *auteurists*' claims could be, nothing ever motivated them except that passion. With the latter-day theoretical critics, passion is apparently inappropriate. We usually feel that they write because Professor A wants his dean to think him up to date or because Professors B and C are contesting for the title of the American Christian Metz or because Professors D to K want to redress history's injustices to women, blacks, Asians, homosexuals, and others by exposing the prejudice and the white male heterosexual viewpoint in past and current films. Sometimes these critiques are, under one sun or another, admirable, but they don't have much to do directly with film passion and pleasure.

Well, what is this film *Gun Cra*zy that all our *auteurist* swains commend it? A perfect example for them, that's what. Its interest is all in its cinematics—its direction, editing, and cinematography. The story is a down-and-dirty *film noir* saga based on a *Saturday Evening Post* story by MacKinlay Kantor, once a best-selling novelist, who co-wrote the screenplay with Millard Kaufman. According to several sources, Kaufman was a front for Dalton Trumbo, then under a HUAC blight. This last is a surprise because Trumbo was a good screenwriter, and the very worst element in this film is its wooden dialogue.

The story is patently derived from the actual Bonnie and Clyde chronicle. And after *Bonnie and Clyde* appeared in 1967, it became *auteur*-chic to say that Lewis's overlooked version was better than Arthur Penn's big hit. This, in the view

of one who didn't care much for *Bonnie and Clyde*, is mere cognoscenti snobbism. Still, *Gun Crazy* has its strengths.

Not in the acting. John Dall and Peggy Cummins are at best passable and are often foolishly strained. Within the restrictions of the period, the screenplay tries to imply strong sexual themes: the pistol as phallus, Cummins as sexually aroused by robbing and killing, Dall a skilled sharpshooter who is seduced into using his talent in crime (a woman teaches him the complete use of his phallus), etc. She has been doing trick shooting in a carnival; he has been doing very little. They hook up and run off together. (One touch that seems quaint today: they stop at a Justice of the Peace en route.) They begin their crime career moderately and get worse as they go. All of this should seem like heat rising, steam filtering through the cracks. Dall and Cummins are simply not up to it.

It's Lewis's picture. Born in 1910, he entered films at the age of seventeen, was an editor, a designer of main titles (the first credits we see), a second-unit director, and at last the director of a string of pop pictures—Westerns, horror, crime, costume. By 1949 he was well flexed, and with Russell Harlan's black-and-white camera, he rose to his opportunity.

Concede that he uses a device now wearily dated, the montage transition—one stickup dissolving into another, one police broadcast into another, newspaper headlines swooping into view. Concede too the obvious bows to budget restraints—the couple's visit to a city depicted by reflected traffic in a shop window, a posse at the end that consists of two men and an off-screen voice. Otherwise, it's virtuoso direction all the way.

The most celebrated sequence is the bank robbery. The camera is in the back seat of the couple's car, and it stays there as Dall goes into the bank to do the job, as Cummins gets out of the car to flirt with a cop and then to coldcock him with a pistol when Dall comes running out with the loot. (Godard, author of a comparable sequence in *Breathless* [1960], surely knew *Gun Crazy*.) But there's much besides.

Three examples. The opening shot, under the main titles, is from the inside of a gunshop window looking out into rain-pelted dingy streets at night while a neon hotel sign blinks on and off. Presto, we are in *film noir* country. Later, in a diner, where the penniless couple have gone for hamburgers—without onions, which would have cost a nickel more—the first shot, past the griddle, down the length of the counter to Dall and Cummins at the end, is like Edward Hopper distilled. At the beginning of the last sequence, in a misty swamp at night, the camera moves through the reeds to pick up the ghostly faces of the fugitive pair as they lie together, as they know and we know that the end is near. Kurosawa wouldn't have been ashamed of that shot.

The texture of the film is self-contradictory. The general intent is ruthless realism, but very little that happens is, in realistic terms, credible. How could this (not very bright) pair possibly have escaped capture as long as they did? How did she and he get the jobs in the meat-packing plant in order to pull off a big job? Especially after their pictures had been in the papers. Etc. But Lewis apparently needed—wanted—a screenplay just sufficiently cogent to let him take off from it.

This view of a script as merely an adequate armature for a director had its origin in the theater. Ever since the Restoration, actor-managers had treated plays—sometimes the classics—merely as opportunities for them to strut their stuff. When the director entered the theater in the late nineteenth century, this

alchemy of dross into gold was even more emphasized. David Belasco produced dozens of plays in a long career, but with the exception of *The Merchant of Venice* (and, to stretch a point, *Madame Butterfly* and *The Girl of the Golden West*), none of them is remotely interesting today. Yet the best critics of the day understood that his authors' scripts were only the medium for Belasco's own art, that he rejected the best new plays of his time (by Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Chekhov) because he didn't want to be under obligations to good material.

And when an art came along in which the director is inescapably the prime figure, no matter how important his colleagues, this practice flourished even more completely. It's flatly impossible to take *Gun Crazy* seriously as a whole, but it's not as a whole that it should be seen. Those who saw Belasco's 1912 production of *The Governor's Lady* marveled, not at the play but at what Belasco did with it—the restaurant scene in particular. Whether or not he knew it, Joseph H. Lewis was carrying on the Belasco tradition in a different venue.

"Stan Laurel, 1890-1965" (*The New Republic*, 5 August 1991)

Arthur Stanley Jefferson, later known as Stan Laurel, was born in Ulverston, England, on June 16, 1890. One hundred and one years and one day later, I arrived in Ulverston to visit the Laurel and Hardy Museum, the only one in the world. The museum consists of two medium-sized rooms off an alley up a side street. One room is decorated with photographs and mementos, and offers videotapes and books and Laurel-and-Hardy dolls for sale. The other is a theater with perhaps twenty seats. Clips from videotapes of Laurel and Hardy play constantly, interrupted only by comments from Bill Cubin, the portly and amiable ex-mayor of Ulverston who founded the museum. Cubin also introduces some home movies that the two comics made in Hollywood, both when they were at their height and in later years when illness forced their retirement. And there is a Dutch TV documentary about the museum, with English commentary, which includes a bit with Cubin.

Any question about how a famous clown came out of this small northern town is answered by the fact that he didn't really come from here, in a sense: his parents were busy theater folk who were just roosting in Ulverston for a while with family. Stan left Ulverston when he was a boy. But the town has made what it could out of his sojourn: there's a plaque on his birthplace, and nearby is a pub called The Stan Laurel, with his endearingly foolish face on the pub sign.

Some friends and I stopped for cream teas in a small tearoom just across a narrow street from a grocery shop called J. J. Gillam & Son. One of the friends, English, said that the shop and its windows looked exactly as she remembered such shops from her childhood. I glanced through a book I had bought at the museum about Stan's early days, and there was a photo of Gillam's looking exactly the same, where he had bought toffee when he was a boy.

I've always been a limited Laurel-and-Hardy enthusiast, the limitation being not their talent but their choices of material. (Toward the end, Laurel said, "We should have stayed in the short-film category. There's just so much we can do along a certain line and then it gets to be unfunny.") But as we strolled through Ulverston afterward, I couldn't help thinking (odd though this connection seems just now) of Zagreb.

In Zagreb I once saw a Laurel-and-Hardy feature, *Fra Diavolo* (1933), in English with Croatian subtitles. I liked it; but the audience was absolutely screaming with joy. Young and old were bouncing up and down in their seats, applauding as they nearly choked with laughter. I was much more moved by them than by the film. What they were loving, or half of it anyway, had originated in these twisty streets of gray stucco houses. Film has made some powers global and, granting the stay of film-stock corruption, immortal.

"The Lumière Brothers: Louis, 1864-1948; and Auguste, 1862-1954" (*The New Republic*, 2 March 1992)

I was in Lyon recently to see Ariane Mnouchkine's company, which is away from its Paris home at the moment, touring France. The Mnouchkine productions—three Greek plays—were wonderful enough, but there were bonuses. First, Lyon itself, a gem. Second, the food, unbelievable. Third, the Institut Lumière. The Lumière brothers, Louis (1864-1948) and Auguste (1862-1954), weren't born in Lyon, but they did their film pioneering there in the house that was built by their father, a successful portrait photographer.

I liked the Institute before I saw it: Lyon predisposes you, especially through its obvious interest in film and theater. The Institute is located on the Rue du Premier-Film, and there is also an Avenue Frères Lumière, an Avenue Roberto Rossellini, a Rue Louis Jouvet, and a Rue Charles Dullin. (I don't even count such commonplaces as a Rue Pierre Corneille and a Quai Romain Rolland.)

Another name that shone before I got there was that of the Institute's president, Bertrand Tavernier, a devout Lyonnais who reveled in his city in *The Clockmaker* (1974) and *A Week's Vacation* (1980). I knew that his title is honorary; still, I hoped he might be there. He wasn't: the director of the Institute, Bernard Chardère, was there, the man who founded the well-known film magazine *Positif* and who has been running this institute since its inception in 1982. He welcomed me.

I've seen other museums that are in the homes of the people they honor—Toulouse-Lautrec's in Albi, Pirandello's in Agrigento, Goethe's in Frankfurt, Shaw's in Ayot St. Lawrence—but, possibly excepting Toulouse's, none was a museum piece in itself. This *Belle Époque* villa is big, bosomy, elegant, with high mansard roofs, stonework chimneys, carved stone under the eaves, and a large glass-enclosed solarium. The reception hall, high-ceilinged and wide, is bordered by a sweeping stairway. The ground floor has several lofty chambers with parquet flooring, ornate mantels wrapping big fireplaces, high mirrors topped by marble heads, inlaid woodwork in the walls, and fancy pargetting in the ceilings. The offices and the library are on the floor above, and I assume (I didn't see them) that they look more contemporary. Downstairs the clothes that I and others were wearing seemed inadequate.

Chardère, who looks a little like the late Henri Langlois, the founder of the Cinémathèque Française, calmly disregarded my ignorance of French and his of English and took me on a guided tour. Because we had some common knowledge of the subject and could each get an occasional phrase in the other language, I had a good time. (I can't speak for him.) The centerpiece of the museum is, naturally, its permanent exhibit on the development of the idea of photography, the need for

it, and the evolution of the moving-picture camera and projector in the hands of the Lumières.

The father, Antoine, was, in addition to his photographic work, a manufacturer of photographic equipment. Louis followed him and Auguste soon joined Louis, and the brothers organized a small factory near the villa for manufacturing photo materials. Then, after he retired, Antoine saw a demonstration in Paris in the early 1890s of the Edison Kinetoscope, a sort of peep show, and he advised his sons to get busy. Others were busy, too, in several countries; the competition was keen. Max Skladanowsky of Berlin actually gave the first public exhibition of film several weeks before the Lumières, but the brothers had already been showing film privately to invited guests. They went public in Paris on December 28, 1895.

It was this début that ignited the global blaze, and the kingpin of the Institute's historical exhibit is the actual projector that was used. Standing now in its place of honor, it looks gawkily innocent. "It's not my fault," it seems to say in its rude mechanical simplicity. "How did I know what would happen?"

The villa and the grounds themselves play a part in the chronicle of early film. The earliest Lumière motion picture, which runs about fifty seconds, is *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895), the Lumière factory. Chardère indicated where it had stood, about eighty yards away. *Feeding Baby* (1895), in which Auguste and his wife tend their infant son, was shot just outside the house on the other side. (Family note: the two brothers married two sisters, daughters of a Lyon brewer. The two families shared the villa.) Both of these items were on that first Paris bill, along with eight other items, most of them shot in Lyon. And all this was done within the lifetimes of some still surviving people.

Chardère explained that various special exhibits run continually—I saw a good one of still photography by someone new—and that there are always film series in progress. The current series is on the subject of actors: the poster features Brando and Garbo. He showed me the very inviting small screening room downstairs, with comfortable scarlet-upholstered seats that, he says, are filled almost every day for the film programs.

Then Chardère loaded me with posters and postcards, pamphlets and brochures, and put me in the car that he had summoned to take me back to my hotel—a good distance because the Institute is in an outlying district. (Called Monplaisir. Ah, those Lyonnaises.) This is my note of thanks.

Since then, I've been thinking of that day less as a trip to a museum than as a visit to some people whom I was too late to catch. The richness and generosity of the villa itself seem to reflect the warmth of the people who lived there. What excitement those rooms must have known in those days when a new age was in birth. I felt that I had sensed it during my visit. Fanciful, of course, but that's what fancy is for.

"Charles Denner, 1926-1995" (*The New Republic*, 16 October 1995)

In Paris, in July of 1971, I went to visit Charles Denner, the sterling French actor who died a few weeks ago. I had been overwhelmed by his very different but equally beautiful performances in two unjustly neglected films of the '60s, Claude Chabrol's *Landru* (1963) and Alain Jessua's *Life Upside Down* (1964), and was

much more keen to talk to him than to the glitzier people offered by UniFrance, the government's film agency. I did see some of the others later, but for me Denner came first, in this quick trip to meet some French artists whose work had appealed to me. What he did and gave on the screen had to have come from somewhere, and I'd long been interested in learning more about him.

The UniFrance translator who took me to Denner's apartment in the Rue Carnot—and a modest building it was—had made a mistake. We rang Denner's doorbell at the appointed time: a dog barked inside. Then my UniFrance friend remembered that she had set the meeting for my hotel. She called the hotel and was told that Denner was there, waiting.

When we arrived, he was sitting quietly in a corner of the hotel's small garden, hatless, wearing a windbreaker, smoking a cigarette. After my apology, which he shrugged off, I told him that in a way I had met his dog before him. He smiled and said something to the effect that maybe he ought to quit while he was ahead.

Some film actors seem larger or smaller than their screen selves when you meet them. Denner was exactly the same size: short, solid, composed but agile. His cheekbones seemed, as on film, to suggest gaunt resolution. His nose was strong, declarative. His voice, as I already knew, was vibrant, with a touch of roughness under the music. He was cordial in a quite formal way, but he seemed pleased that a foreigner had sought him out.

I told him why: because of his work in several films, including, from 1968, Truffaut's *The Bride Wore Black* (where he played the artist) and, from 1969, Costa-Gavras's *Z* (as the friend of Yves Montand whom the opposition tries to run down with an automobile) but especially for those two major roles. (It's a disgrace to have to identify in this way—as I guess I must—an actor of Denner's quality.) He glowed a bit. I told him I wanted to know more about the man who had done those performances. Would he tell me about himself?

He nodded and lit another cigarette. He had been born in 1926 to a Polish Jewish family who lived near Krakow and had been brought to France when he was 4. His earliest ambition was to be a cantor in a synagogue. He was in his early teens when the war came. He had joined the Resistance and had met an older man in his unit who became his intellectual mentor. They read Racine and Molière together (Denner even memorized the latter's *Misanthrope*) in their hideouts. After the war, though he had never seen a play or a film, he decided to be an actor. He went to study with the renowned Charles Dullin, largely because he knew Jean-Louis Barrault had studied with Dullin, and Denner venerated Barrault's performance in *Children of Paradise* (1945).

He first worked in political theater with a group of French-Jewish actors called the Companions of the Ark. In 1949 he was engaged by Jean Vilar, the founder of the Théâtre National Populaire, for Vilar's annual festival at Avignon, and he was with Vilar until 1953. By the time of our meeting he had appeared in 130 plays (and had also made numerous television appearances). When he spoke about acting to me, the term he used over and over is "composition," in both the musical and painterly senses. And how did film acting differ from theater acting for him? "In the theater I am naked. In films I am naked in a closed room."

Denner's first film was a small part in Louis Malle's *Elevator to the Gallows* (1957), one of the earliest works of the French New Wave. Chabrol saw him in a celebrated Vilar production of Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, in which he

had played the Hermann Goering character with a red wig and lots of padding, and chose him in 1962 for the character of Landru, slim with a shaved head and a bushy black beard. Two years later, he played the lead in Jessua's *Life Upside Down*, a man whom we see slide slowly, dreamily, happily into immobilizing mental illness.

I told him I thought that *Landru*, a serious version of the Bluebeard story, ought to be played on double bills with Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947). Denner took that as a considerable compliment and said that he himself had dared to hope this might happen sometime. (It never did, to my knowledge.) I told him that I would show *Landru* every year in a film course of mine if an undubbed 16mm print were available. (It never has been.) But I often showed *Life Upside Down*, I told him. "*Je suis très content*," he said, and looked it.

In later years, among many other roles, he played the lead in Truffaut's *The Man Who Loved Women* (1983). But before that film was made, he did Claude Lelouch's *And Now My Love* (1974). When Truffaut was in America in 1976 he wrote to a friend that Denner was "quite known and liked here" because of the Lelouch picture.

Denner hasn't been visible since 1986: he spent his last decade fighting cancer. His death, at the age of sixty-nine, is a sharp reminder that his best work belongs in the gallery of the best acting in film history and ought to have the same (somewhat slim) chance of being remembered as the rest of that gallery. In any case, goodbye to him and thanks.

***Le Samouraï*, Jean-Pierre Melville, 1967 (*The New Republic*, 17 March 1997)**

The French star Alain Delon is now retired, but a 1967 film of his has just been released in the United States in its original version. *Le Samouraï* was directed by Jean-Pierre Melville, a hero of the French New Wave, who wrote the taut screenplay from a Joan McLeod novel. The picture, which is about a Parisian contract killer, was released in America in a doctored version in the early 1970s under the title *The Godson*—apropos of you know what. Now, restored, it is given its real American premiere at the Film Forum in New York.

The original title is wrong, too. A *samurai* did not accept commissions to kill merely for money: honor and ethics were involved. But Delon's character is simply a technician with no criterion except efficiency and no purpose except cash. He is alone. He has a girlfriend who adores him, but he accepts her adoration rather stonily. He lives within himself. Melville gives him no antecedents or explanations, few feelings, and very little dialogue. A schemer, this man's drama is in the rupture of his schemes.

Melville's establishing shot at the start establishes more than place. We see a shadowy, mean room, two windows at the back pasted with gray light. It's like a stage set in black and white. Then we see that there's a man present, an inhabitant of this dark, lying on the bed, smoking. It's only after Delon leaves this room that some color—not much—enters the film. The silent stalker slips out of his lair into the world, kills, withdraws.

What Melville quite rightly counted on to bolster his film, to answer questions and also to suggest new ones, was Delon's face. Gray-eyed, delicate, almost angelic, Delon's face is so unconnected with his profession that we are

strangely awed. Antonioni used this contradiction differently in *Eclipse* (1962) by making Delon a busy stockbroker. Melville uses that face to effect a reversal of convention.

Here is an icy killer, with no overt claims to our sympathy. Yet, through Melville's intense emphasis on his face, we are held. The action is lean and shivery, but it's the face that holds us. We want to know more about this man though we doubt that we will. Thus the film medium exercises a peculiar strength: it transforms an actor's face, in itself, into a protagonist.

Chronology: Stanley Jules Kauffmann

Born: 24 April 1916 in New York City, the son of Joseph H. Kauffmann, a dentist, and Jeanette (Steiner) Kauffmann; one sibling, a sister, who pre-deceased him.

Died: 9 October 2013 in New York City.

Educated: in the public schools of New York City (including DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx) and at New York University (B.F.A., 1935).

Married: 5 February 1943, to Laura (Cohen) Kauffmann (died in 2012); no children.

Positions

Actor-Stage Manager, Washington Square Players, New York, 1931-1941
Associate Editor, Bantam Books, 1949-1952
Editor-in-Chief, Ballantine Books, 1952-1956
Editor, Alfred A. Knopf, 1959-1960
Film Critic, *The New Republic*, 1958-1965, 1967-2013
Drama Critic, WNET-TV, New York, 1963-1965
Host, "The Art of Film," WNET-TV, New York, 1963-1967
Drama Critic, *The New York Times*, 1966
Associate Literary Editor, *The New Republic*, 1966-1967
Theater Critic, *The New Republic*, 1969-1979
Professor of Drama, Yale University, 1967-1973, 1977-1986
Distinguished Professor of English, York College, City University of New York, 1973-1976
Visiting Professor of Drama, City University of New York Graduate Center, 1976-1992
Theater Critic, *Saturday Review*, 1979-1985
Distinguished Visiting Professor of Theater and Film, Adelphi University, 1992-1996
Visiting Professor of Drama, Hunter College, City University of New York, 1993-2006

Awards and Distinctions

Emmy for "The Art of Film," WNET-TV, New York, 1963-1964
Honorary Fellow, Morse College, Yale University, 1964-2013
Ford Foundation Fellow for Study Abroad, 1964 and 1971
Juror, National Book Awards, 1969, 1975
George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism, 1972-1973

Member, Theater Advisory Panel, National Endowment for the Arts, 1972-1976

Rockefeller Fellow, 1978

Guggenheim Fellow, 1979-1980

George Polk Award for Film Criticism, 1982

Edwin Booth Award for Significant Impact on Theater and Performance in New York, 1986

Travel Grant from the Japan Foundation for Interest in and of Support of Japanese Films, 1986

Birmingham Film Festival Prize for Lifetime Achievement, 1986

Fellow, New York Institute for the Humanities, 1995

Outstanding Teacher Award, Association for Theater in Higher Education, 1995

Telluride Film Festival Award for Criticism, 1999

"Film Culture: Past and Present," Symposium in Honor of Stanley Kauffmann, sponsored by the Center for the Humanities at the City University of New York Graduate Center, 2002

Featured in the documentary film *For the Love of Movies: The Story of American Film Criticism*, 2009

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Non-Fiction

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Figures of Light: Film Criticism and Comment (1971)
American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to Citizen Kane (1972)
Living Images: Film Criticism and Comment (1975)
Persons of the Drama: Theater Criticism and Comment (1976)
Before My Eyes: Film Criticism and Comment (1980)
Albums of Early Life (memoirs, 1980)
Theater Criticisms (1983)
Field of View: Film Criticism and Comment (1986)
Distinguishing Features: Film Criticism and Comment (1994)
Regarding Film: Film Criticism and Comment (2001)
Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann (2003)
Albums of a Life (memoirs, 2007)
About the Theater (2010)
Ten Great Films (2012)
Film Critic Talks: Interviews with Stanley Kauffmann, 1972-2012 (2013)

Fiction

The King of Proxy Street (1941)
The Bad Samaritan (1943)
This Time Forever (1945)
The Hidden Hero (1949)
The Tightrope (1952; *The Philanderer*, U.K.)
A Change of Climate (1954; a.k.a. *A New Desire*)
Showdown Creek (1955, under the pseudonym Lucas Todd; filmed in 1957 as *Fury at*
Showdown, starring John Derek)
Man of the World (1956; *The Very Man*, U.K.)
If It Be Love (1960)

Drama

The Red-Handkerchief Man (three acts, 1933)
The Mayor's Hose (one-act, 1934)
How She Managed Her Marriage (one-act, 1935); *The Singer in Search of a Key* (one-act, 1935); *The True Adventure* (three acts, 1935)
Altogether Reformed (three acts, 1936); *Father Spills the Beans* (three acts, 1936)
A Million Stars (one-act, 1937); *Cyrano of the Long Nose* (one-act, 1937); *The Marooning of Marilla* (one-act, 1937); *A Word from the Wise, for Three Women* (1937); *Come Again: A South Seas Vignette* (one-act, 1937); *Coming of Age* (one-act, 1937); *Eleanor on the Hill: A Fantasia* (one-act, 1937); *His First Wife* (one-act, 1937)
The Cow Was in the Parlor (one-act, 1938); *Mr. Flemington Sits Down* (one-act,

1938); *Right under Her Nose* (one-act, 1938)
The More the Merrier (one-act, 1939)
Overhead (one-act, 1940); *Play Ball!* (1940); *Close Courting* (one-act, 1940); *The Prince Who Shouldn't Have Shaved: A Frolic* (one-act, 1940); *The Salvation of Mr. Song* (one-act, 1940)
Bobino, His Adventures (two-act children's play, 1941)
The Bayfield Picture (one-act, 1942); *Pig of My Dreams* (one-act, 1942)
Cupid's Bow (one-act, 1943)
Food for Freedom (one-act children's play, 1944)